

Representative Filemon Vela – Texas-34

FY 2020 - Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development

Good morning and thank you for your time today. I represent the Lower Rio Grande Valley, a diverse coastal district separated from Mexico by the Rio Grande river. It has a rich history of land and water rights and enjoys a unique ecosystem that provides habitat to one of the most diverse bird populations in the country. We have seen unprecedented growth in the valley, but still have one of the poorest populations. We support and encourage local involvement in managing that ecosystem but cannot do this without the help of the federal government. The Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) is critical to the livelihood and economic prosperity of my district. With that in mind, there are a few program areas that I encourage your support in the FY20 appropriations process.

First, I ask for support and funding of the ACE Investigations Account. Funds in this account are critical to continue the important progress made in restoring the Resaca system of Brownsville, Texas, and to develop a regional watershed management plan for one of the fastest growing regional water planning areas in the nation. I greatly appreciate the assistance over the past several years in funding for both the Investigations and Continuing Authorities Program (CAP) accounts. This has enabled the ACE and the Brownsville Public Utilities Board (BPUB) to advance the Brownsville Resacas Restoration program. The program's most significant achievement was securing a project authorization in America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2018, Section 1401, (5).

It is my understanding is that the Army Corps Galveston district could utilize \$2,000,000 for work on this project with BPUB in FY20 for preconstruction engineering and design (PED) and expects to complete a Project Partnership Agreement (PPA) in 2020 with BPUB. If the Corps and BPUB complete the PPA as planned, the Brownsville Resacas Ecosystem Restoration project should be positioned for consideration as a new start construction project for FY21. The resacas in Brownsville are the last remaining ones along the Rio Grande, so restoring them is vital to preserving this important ecosystem.

In addition to the Resaca projects, ACE Galveston District is collaborating with BPUB to produce a regional watershed assessment to identify possible opportunities to develop a watershed management plan for the Lower Rio Grande Valley region. Support of the ACE Investigations Account is critical to assist communities like mine to address ecosystem restoration and flooding problems.

Next, I would also encourage support for funding of the ACE Section 205 CAP account. Sec. 205 CAP funds would assist the Army Corps in addressing flooding issues in my district, particularly in communities prone to such occurrences like Weslaco. Over the past several decades, communities in my district have experienced severe and recurring flooding. According to the city of Weslaco, recent storms damaged 20 percent of structures, including buildings critical for first responders. My understanding is that the Army Corps Galveston could utilize \$125,000 in FY20 to assist in development of a watershed assessment of the area to begin to address these problems. Continued support

for the Sec. 205 CAP account would help provide the resources to move projects like this forward.

Finally, almost twenty years ago, Congress recognized the need to conserve and enhance the water supplies for ten counties in southwest Texas by passing the Lower Rio Grande Valley Water Resources Conservation and Improvement Act. With water shortages continuing due to ongoing drought conditions, high population growth, and recurring non-compliance by Mexico of the 1944 Treaty between the United States and Mexico, the need to continue this initiative is more important than ever. To date, nineteen projects have been approved for the program, which still need appropriations. These projects reduce and recover water losses due to seepage and evaporation, allow for efficient operation of the water delivery system and save individual irrigation districts thousands of dollars each year in water and energy costs. For Fiscal Year 2020, I encourage \$2,000,000 in appropriations for the continuation of the program. This is a modest investment that will ensure the region's economy remains viable for many years to come.

I thank you for your time and consideration of these requests.