

## **Rep. Escobar, State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs**

Thank you, Chairwoman Lee and Ranking Member Rogers, for hosting this Member Day hearing.

As the representative for El Paso, Texas, I am here to talk about an agency that most Americans have likely never heard of, but is absolutely vital for those of us who live on the southern border: the International Boundary and Water Commission, or IBWC. As this subcommittee knows, the overall mission of IBWC is to oversee the application of United States – Mexico treaties, including settling difference that may arise in their application. However, IBWC also plays a critical role in maintaining levees, dams, and other flood damage reduction activities. The United States section has been working diligently to meet the needs of communities along bodies of water like the Rio Grande and I would like to thank the subcommittee for its steadfast leadership in increasing the agency's funding over the past several years. However, after meeting with IBWC leadership and local stakeholders in my district, in order for IBWC to meet the needs of the moment, they need substantially higher

funding beginning in Fiscal Year 2023. That is why I am requesting a \$40 million increase for IBWC, divided evenly between the Salaries & Expenses and Construction accounts.

At the moment, IBWC needs more funding to address three critical areas: dredging of sediment, levee construction and repair, and replacement of heavy equipment. Because of a lack of funds, sediment has accumulated along the Rio Grande since the late 1990s and as a result, deferred maintenance has elevated flood risks in the vicinity of El Paso. While I have spoken with Commissioner Gilner about this issue and know that she is committed to addressing it, the deferred dredging will likely cost hundreds of millions of dollars over the span of several years. The increase I am proposing would allow IBWC to begin making a dent into the deferred dredging while also beginning to plan for yearly dredging.

With regard to levees, the role IBWC plays in their construction and repair is central to reducing flood risks for border residents. However, because work on the levees has been slow due to funding

constraints, they have also played a direct role in the FEMA flood mapping process. More specifically, the draft flood maps FEMA has developed for El Paso now include large swaths of homes that would not normally be placed in these flood zones. The only reason they are included is because a nearby IBWC levee is either lacking certification or needs repairs. This places an additional financial burden upon homeowners to purchase flood insurance. Getting IBWC the funds necessary to expeditiously take care of the levees will reduce flood risk and allow FEMA to properly evaluate the existing flood landscape.

The final funding priority is getting IBWC the funds needed to replace their existing heavy equipment. I was shocked to learn that some of the heavy equipment used in the El Paso area is simply not suitable for workers and are in dire need of upgrades. Providing more funds to the Border Heavy Equipment program will allow IBWC to replace their existing inventory with state-of-the-art construction equipment while also protecting their own workers.

In addition to a funding increase, we need to help bring IBWC into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I am encouraged by Commissioner Gilner's vision for IBWC and believe we should do what we can to support her. For example, engaging with institutions of higher education for research is something many other federal agencies do regularly and they benefit greatly from it. Oftentimes this engagement allows them to find solutions to longstanding problems that they may not have been able to find otherwise. My report language request would simply encourage the IBWC to develop a strategy for engaging in research with institutions of higher education, specifically those along the southern border. This research would be limited to the purposes of their mission but I believe could yield results for the future of IBWC.

Thank you to the subcommittee for this opportunity and consideration of my requests.