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RIO GURGLE; The once-mighty border river doesn't even reach the gulfthis year, and both sides are concerned about conservation andwater management.

**BYLINE:** **Alison Gregor**

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ROWNSVILLE - Once a river that thundered down from Colorado, spilling into South Texas and nourishing millions of acres of farmland, the Rio Grande has dribbled to a standstill.

It has petered out into a finger of water that stops 300 feet short of the Gulf of Mexico, blocked by a sandbar formed by silt.

Old-timers say the mouth of the Rio Grande went dry once before for several months, back in 1956. Still, the 4-month-old sandbar at the once-mighty river's mouth has them worried.

It has shown no signs of disappearing.

"The river Rio Grande may cease to be a river," said Leonard Loop, who has farmed Brownsville's fertile fields for decades. "I think to be classified as a river, it's got to be a flowing stream, hit the end of the gulf or something, and it's not doing it.

"It's getting to be a stagnant body of water."

The Mexican city of Matamoros, across from Brownsville, suffered a critical water shortage in May when the river dried up near its intake plant.

Farmers on both sides of the border, but particularly in Mexico, have watched their fields wilt and blacken. Their quarrel over the scarce resource has embroiled both countries in a dispute over the waters of the Rio Grande.

Among other factors, water officials blame uncontrollable and thick mats of exotic river vegetation, hydrilla and water hyacinth, for choking the river.

And the river's mouth is bone dry.

That, say environmentalists, may have even more dire consequences for the ecosystem and economy of the region.

They worry the delicate estuary, where fresh and salt water meet to form an aquatic habitat essential to many marine organisms such as white shrimp, snook, blue crabs and striped mullet, may be permanently damaged.

"Is this a wake-up call? Absolutely," said Randy Blankinship, Lower Laguna Madre ecosystem leader for Texas Parks & Wildlife. "Worldwide, this has drawn attention.

"We're looking at the loss of one estuary, and it's a relatively small one compared to others on the coast. However, it is very alarming and disturbing to lose even one estuary."

And the wheels still are turning for even more projects on the stressed river. A weir dam has been proposed in Brownsville, about 25 miles from the river's mouth.

Water planners use the "drought of record," or the least amount of water available historically, to allocate water rights and plan for the future.

The recent decade without adequate rainfall on the Rio Grande well may have surpassed the worst drought in the region's history.

"In the Rio Grande Valley, we're redefining the drought of record," said Larry McKinney, senior director for aquatic resources at Texas Parks & Wildlife. "It used to be in the '50s, and it may well now be in the late '90s and 2000.

"We've never seen stress conditions like that along the Rio Grande."

Complicating problems is the history of water planning in Texas, which has built environmental controls into water rights allocation only since the mid-1980s. The bulk of water rights were sold before then.

"One of the things we have not done in Texas historically, because we never had the need, (is) we've never had to consider the fact that, yeah, you actually have to have water in a river to make it a river," McKinney said.

Regional leaders recently completed a 50-year water use plan for the state that may lack just that element.

The plan predicts overall water use in the region will remain largely the same, though it will shift from agriculture to cities, while the amount of water available will shrink with silting in Rio Grande reservoirs.

The plan recommends many strategies to conserve water, but "that doesn't directly relate to ensuring, let's say, a certain amount of flows out the mouth of the river," said Ken Jones, director of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council, which administered the planning process.

Glenn Jarvis, chairman of the group that produced the plan, agreed that the river's water rights were perfected at a time when environmental concerns were largely nonexistent.

"At the same time, what we're trying to do is take those issues into account in the planning to try to come up with solutions that are going to be environmentally sound," he said.

Thus, the plan suggests $930 million worth of projects, including desalination plants.

Jarvis said it was difficult to accept that the river is doomed due to recent events during a time of drought.

"I think we're just going through a period," he said. "No one knows what will happen in the future. If history repeats itself, we will have some floods, and then everything will settle down again."

But environmentalists argue that history has repeated itself - throughout the world, where estuary after estuary has been destroyed by reduced freshwater flows, pollution and overharvesting.

They cite as examples the Chesapeake Bay system and the mouth of the Colorado River at the Sea of Cortez.

The federal government is allocating billions of dollars to revive the Everglades, which were almost drained to develop agricultural lands and cities.

On a recent flight over the river's mouth, a sprinkling of shacks in Mexican tidal flats south of the Rio Grande looked largely deserted. Blocked river water is flowing south into the flats.

"Those are commercial crab fisherman," pilot Buddy Ude said.

But now there's no flow from the Gulf of Mexico to refresh the area's marine organisms.

"It must be fished out by now," Ude added.

At Boca Chica beach, named after the small mouth of the big river, a 3-foot-high sand wall protects the U.S. border. The actual border is 100 feet away on the Mexican side.

Clad in swimming trunks, Oscar Martinez recently gazed at the end of the Rio Grande, reduced to a shallow puddle from a powerful maelstrom of currents.

Several families had disembarked from pickups with charcoal for barbecues in hand.

"Now people come to swim here," said the Matamoros resident, gazing pensively at the very still, very brown water. "Before, when there was water, it was dangerous. The currents could sweep you away."

The drought, which began about the time the North American Free Trade Agreement became law in 1993, has not hindered growth in the region.

But as the populations of cities have exploded along with industrial growth, farms on both sides of the border are parched.

An international dispute over the Rio Grande's diminishing water has remained unresolved. Under a 1944 treaty that divvies up the river's water, Mexico owes the United States almost 1.4 million acre-feet, or nearly 500 billion gallons.

A partial accord was reached in March, and Mexico has agreed to deliver almost half of its debt, 600,000 acre-feet of water, by July 31.

Farmers in Matamoros know they are last in a string of cities that use the Rio Grande as their sole water source. And they are feeling it this year as they watch their plants shrivel and wonder how Mexico can afford to pay its water debt.

"Last year, we got water for one irrigation," said Carmelo Gonzalez, who now, for lack of water, raises only sorghum on his 1,000 acres. That is, when he raises anything at all.

"This year, we got none. I lost my crop. The situation is critical."

Rumors continue to circulate that 15,000 disgruntled farmers in northeastern Mexico are going to sue the country's National Water Commission for agreeing to release the water.

Still, that lawsuit hasn't materialized, said Javier Mendoza, a spokesman for the commission in Mexico City.

Mexican farmers may be rethinking their role. Gonzalez said he recognizes that inefficient water usage in Mexico, largely due to lack of education and old infrastructure, is hurting both sides of the border.

"Have you had drinking water on your side? Yes?" he asked, shaking his head. "The gringos conserve more water than we do. It's sad that we had so much water, and we threw it away, and now we're suffering the consequences."

For three days in May, water had to be rationed citywide when the river dried up near Matamoros' intake plant. About 100,000 people in the city of 500,000 received no water.

"We were down to less than 60 centimeters of water in the river," said Salvador Trevino Garza, manager of the city's water and drainage district.

Brownsville, which had sufficient water because of its gravity-based water-delivery infrastructure, had to help out its Mexican sister city. It halted pumping temporarily.

Trevino, who also received the help of a pump that was placed northwest of Matamoros where there still was water, said international cooperation, not antagonism, is going to solve the region's water problems.

"The growth of one city is going to be the growth of the other," he said. "And if one city falls - in this case, Matamoros - it will be the fall of the other city as well.

"The only thing we're asking is, don't leave us dry."