Regional Workgroup
Coahuila-Nuevo León-Tamaulipas-Texas
(Four State Regional Workgroup)

Meeting of the Amistad Task Force

December 8, 2015
1:00 – 4:30 pm

Del Rio Civic Center
1915 Veterans Blvd.
Del Rio, TX 78840

Minutes

Summary of Participants: Officials from EPA Region 6, Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC), Secretariat of Environment in Coahuila, City of Del Rio, Municipio de Acuña, Maverick County, Municipio de Piedras Negras, SIMAS (Piedras Negras water utility), Technological Institute of Piedras Negras, and other non-profit environmental organizations.

Dr. Carlos Rincon of the EPA Region 6 El Paso office provided an overview of the structure, goals and objectives of the Border 2020 Program.

Victor Wong discussed the meeting objectives and discussed the 2015-2016 action plan for the Amistad Task Force. Wong mentioned that there are 14 projects in the plan and briefly summarized the new projects that were added to the plan.

Alejandra Carrera (Secretariat of Environment in Coahuila) discussed the status of the restoration of Las Vacas stream in Acuña.

The Secretariat of Environment in Coahuila (SEMAC) was awarded an EPA Border 2020 grant to conduct a diagnostic study on the water quality and ecological conditions of Las Vacas stream, which flows through Ciudad Acuña and is a tributary of the Rio Grande.

SEMAC partnered with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), Ciudad Acuña and the Institute of Higher Studies in Acuña to develop different phases of the study.

The first step of the project consisted of conducting diagnostics based on methodological standards. This process entailed dividing each area of the stream into color codes. These colors were useful in evaluating the water quality and ecological conditions of each area. Researchers found that there are sections of the stream that are in good conditions, but the rural areas before the stream flows into Acuña were found to have issues related to illegal dumping, extraction of rock material by rock quarries, and deforestation.

A geographical system was developed on Google Earth to include data on issues found in each of the sections of Las Vacas stream.

SEMAC implemented programs related to water quality monitoring, flora and fauna, reforestation, enforcement and identification of polluted point sources, to conduct assessments on the stream's ecological conditions.

SEMAC, TCEQ and the LBJ School of the UT Austin organized a technical exchange to share information on TCEQ's surface water quality regulations and procedures. The Technological Institute of Higher Studies of Acuña (ITSA) and SEMAC also presented the findings of the study at the Environmental Trade Fair held in Austin in May.

A Quality Assurance Performance Plan (QAAP) was drafted to identify sampling points for each of the sections of the stream. Sampling was conducted at 15 monitoring sites. The sampling results yielded that the stream has good water quality. There were no sources of heavy metals detected.

SEMAC, TCEQ, IBWC and CILA (Comisión Internacional de Límites y Agua) organized a binational training on water quality monitoring in November. The goals of the training were to share information on surface water quality monitoring regulations by Texas and Mexico, and train staff on sampling techniques and procedures. This training renewed interest on implementing a rivers program in Coahuila that would be similar to Texas' Clean Rivers Program.

The flora and fauna portion of the study identified more than 408 species of wildlife along the stream--26 are fish species, 185 flora species, 124 bird species.

Ciudad Acuña and SEMAC will also be working on a reforestation program along the stream within the city.

One of the priorities is to enhance surveillance and develop an effective enforcement program to report illegal dumping and deforestation in areas near the stream.

Ciudad Acuña has worked constantly on monitoring point source pollution to prevent discharges from collectors to the stream.

Next steps

- Maintain a binational approach to enhance stewardship and develop a Coahuila rivers program in the near future
- Engage the public and foster awareness on the conservation of Las Vacas stream
- Promote public policy at the local, state and federal level

This project can serve as the model to replicate similar conservation programs in other creeks and rivers in Coahuila.

Dr. Felipe Uribe (Colegio de la Frontera Norte-- COLEF) presented on a project related to an environmental and public health information model in the Coahuila-Texas border. This project was funded under the EPA's Border 2020 Program.

COLEF is working with Dr. Genny Carrillo of the Texas A&M Health Science Center in McAllen on the Texas side of the project.

The project consists of developing a database that has information on health and environmental statistics in Texas and Coahuila. COLEF worked with health agencies in Texas and Mexico to obtain statistics and build information on health indicators.

Dr. Uribe discussed the structure of the health system in Mexico. The national health system in Mexico is divided into public and private providers. He briefly discussed the role of public health institutions like IMSS (Mexican Social Security System), ISSSTE (Institute for Social Security and Services for State Workers), and Mexico's Seguro Popular. Most of the health data is acquired through these institutions.

COLEF found that 64.5% of the population is eligible to use health care programs administered by Mexico's public health institutions and 33% is not eligible to receive medical services through these programs. Half of the dependents are eligible to receive services through IMSS, 6.6% receive services through ISSSTE programs, and 36% are enrolled in Mexico's Seguro Popular. In the Coahuila border, more than 75% of the population in Acuña is eligible for public health services and 77% in Piedras Negras.

Information on health statistics can be obtained through Mexico's national epidemiological surveillance system. Health data is generated in hospitals and local clinics and it is channeled through the city's health agencies at the local level and flows to state agencies and Mexico's Health Secretariat.

COLEF drafted a Memorandum of Understanding with Coahuila's Health Secretariat and requested data on health illnesses associated with environmental risks. COFEPRIS (Mexico's Federal Commission for Sanitary Risks) worked with COLEF to provide specific data on cardiorespiratory illnesses, such as Asthma. COLEF also requested information on hospital discharges of patients with diabetes and other circulatory illnesses, since there are studies that show a correlation between pollutants and these type of health issues.

Data was obtained through local health jurisdictions in Acuña and Piedras Negras. With this data, COLEF started putting together information to build specific health indicators.

There are bureaucratic constraints on the Mexican side that prevent access to specific health data for these areas.

Eloy Rivera (Acuña Ecology Program) discussed Ciudad Acuña's diagnostic study on household hazardous waste and scrap tire program.

The study included training auto body shops and generators on the storage and adequate disposal of household hazardous waste. Ciudad Acuña modified their environmental municipal ordinance to require the disposal of waste generated in auto body shops.

The municipio conducted a census on the number of auto shops and generators that use waste products in their operation. The results yielded that 60% of auto body shops dispose of used oil through a recycling company, but 40% of micro generators don't get serviced by the same recycler, because of their distance from their place of business (the company is located about three hours from Acuña) and it is not economically feasible to collect small amounts of waste from these small businesses.

The municipio modified its environmental ordinance on hazardous waste. It requires small generators to apply for an operating license for six months and inspections by ecology staff to monitor their waste in their establishments.

Ciudad Acuña made an agreement with CECATI (a workforce training center) to conduct certification courses on the storage and disposal of hazardous waste. More than 64 establishments have been certified out of 97 in the community. The municipio is in the process of installing a temporary collection site and is in negotiations with a waste services provider to pick up and recycle these wastes. The temporary site is expected to open next year.

Ciudad Acuña had more than 700 dengue cases in 2013. There are over 600,000 scrap tires in the city. The municipio is currently picking up scrap tires and storing them at a site near the landfill. It is estimated that there are over 400,000 tires at the site.

The ecology program conducted a census on the number of tire generators in the community and created a scrap tire use program. In addition to a tire disposal site near the landfill, the municipio opened another tire site at a central location for generators to bring their tires. Generators are required to properly dispose their scrap tires at the site or get their operating license suspended. The municipio keeps a log of the tires brought by establishments. This is a way to track if establishments are complying with the ordinance.

A scrap tire workshop was held with generators to discuss tire issues and disposal methods. More than 2200 scrap tires have been collected and disposed from local establishments as a result of the workshop and the municipio's tire ordinance. Another factor that needed to be addressed is the amount of space that tires occupy at the landfill.

To address this issue, the municipio started to cut the tires in three pieces. A knife is used to cut the rubber material of the tires and use it as liner to plant trees or create traffic signs. The municipio also signed an agreement with PASA (a solid waste services provider) to use their cutter to process the rolled rim component. The tire pieces are tied with a rope and shipped to the site near the landfill. The municipio has cut and disposed of more than 30,000 tires using this method.

It has also saved up space at their landfill by reducing the tire volume by 70%, beautifying the city's green areas and preventing health issues associated with whole tires. Along with this program, Ciudad Acuña initiated an educational campaign about Dengue in schools. Students learn about prevention tools and health risks associated with tires.

Oscar Flores (Secretariat of Environment in Coahuila) discussed the results of a green infrastructure forum held in Saltillo and Coahuila's used electronics program.

The idea came up as a result of forums held in Ciudad Juarez and Tucson, Arizona. There was also a forum in San Luis Rio Colorado, where participants applied these concepts.

The Secretariat of the Environment in Coahuila identified areas where they could develop green infrastructure. The main goal is to build micro-basins in parks to capture rain water and irrigate these areas. A forum was held in Saltillo in November. More than 25 municipalities participated at the event. The main audience consisted of ecology and public works directors from these communities.

Participants received certifications for attending the workshop. The Secretariat of Environment in Coahuila (SEMAC) is working with a consultant and the Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC) to apply these green concepts in state parks. Some municipalities have also started to develop green infrastructure in some of their public parks.

Flores also presented the results of a used electronics collection program named 'Recolectron,' spearheaded by the Secretariat of Environment in Coahuila (SEMAC).

The goal of the program is to recycle discarded electronics and foster awareness on health risks associated with electronic waste. More than 21 municipalities and 115 organizations participated in this program this year. Coahuila worked with the private sector to open 46 temporary collection sites for electronics and also opened two collection sites in Saltillo and Torreon. SEMAC will also launch collection campaigns in municipalities along the coal deposit region and sign an agreement with a waste services recycler to dispose this type of waste.

The goal of the program is to collect more than 259 tons per year. From 2012 to 2015, SEMAC has collected more than 187 tons. This year more than 90 tons were collected. The goal for next year is to collect more than 100 tons of used electronics. SEMAC will be working with Piedras Negras and Green Tec Osos (an environmental organization of the Piedras Negras Technological Institute) to develop environmental awareness campaigns and collection events in that city.

Rene Maldonado (City of Del Rio) discussed a permit for an air curtain incinerator that the city is in the process of receiving from TCEQ.

The city had issues with stocked piles of mulch at the landfill, so it decided to request a permit from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) for an incinerator to burn brush. It is basically a turbo engine that pushes hot air into a chamber, turns the material into ashes and throws it into a trench.

The dimensions of the engine would be 12 feet wide by 35 feet long and 10 feet deep. The burning process takes several days until the trench is filled with ash and left to cool off for a day and then it is cleaned up to start with the process again.

Del Rio collected about 4,717,020 pounds of limbs and brush in 2014-2015. The city had contracted a waste services provider to mulch the brush, but it was costly.

As of last month, the city had picked up more than 518.3 tons of brush. The city collects brush on a monthly basis from residents. The cost estimate to hire a company to mulch a 10 foot pile of brush would be about $37,150.00. The cost of the model air incinerator is about $36,850.00, which represents savings for over $300 to the city. The TCEQ permit allows the incinerator to operate up to 600 hours a year.

Emeterio Salinas discussed Del Rio's recycling program. The city initiated their recycling program in 2008. The city has a recycling center to store their recyclable material. Two trailers were obtained through grants. These units are stationed at different sites to collect recyclables from residents.

A trailer is stationed at schools to collect all type of recyclables such as plastic and paper.

For fiscal year 2014-2015, the city has collected more than 343.6 tons of recyclable material. The center has a shredder to process paper and it also stores used electronics. The city collected more than 54.6 tons of electronics in 2014-2015.

Red River (a solid waste services provider) and the city initiated a curbside recycling program in April 2014. Every resident gets a plastic container to store their recyclables. The material is picked up every two weeks and shipped to San Antonio. Since 2014, more than 428.9 tons of recyclables were diverted from the landfill.

The city organizes a recycling drive for residents to collect recyclable materials twice a year. There is no cost for residents to bring their recyclables. The city also organizes a tire drive every year. The tires are stored in a trailer and picked up by a company to be disposed in San Antonio.

Tours are conducted for schools at the recycling center. Students learn about recycling tools and are provided with literature and educational materials.

Briselda Duarte (Border Environment Cooperation Commission—BECC) discussed the role of the BECC and projects funded for this year's RFP.

More than 100 proposals were received for this year's Border 2020 RFP, and 15 were selected for the Four-State Regional Workgroup.

BECC certifies projects related to water and sewage, residential and industrial waste, air quality, clean renewable energy, and energy efficiency.

Duarte provided a list of infrastructure projects funded by the North American Development Bank (NadBank). BECC has certified more than 257 projects with financing from NadBank of over 2.24 billion dollars, benefiting more than 15 million people along the border region.

She announced the projects that were funded and selected under this year's RFP in the Amistad region. The Secretariat of Environment in Coahuila will be conducting a used electronics program in municipalities along the state and the Green Tec Osos environmental organization will be conducting a used electronics awareness campaign in Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras. Funds for over $709,220 were allocated for 15 projects in the Texas-Coahuila-Nuevo Leon-Tamaulipas area.

Duarte provided a brief overview of the rest of the projects funded for this RFP in the Four-State Regional Workgroup. These projects are related to water quality, energy, waste management and emergency response.

She underscored the importance of creating synergies to enhance binational cooperation to address environmental challenges along the border region.

Victor Ibarra (Piedras Negras Technological Institute—Green Tec Osos) provided an overview of a used electronics awareness campaign that Green Tec Osos will be organizing as a result of this year's Border 2020 RFP.

The objectives of the project are to promote an integrated approach to waste materials management and clean sites, and develop sustainable practices.

Green Tec Osos will conduct an assessment of the life cycle of used electronics to determine their use and adequate disposal methods.

One aspect of the project consists of installing four containers (two for Eagle Pass and two for Piedras Negras) to collect used electronics in both communities.

The Piedras Negras Technological Institute will be collaborating with the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) in organizing a used electronics symposium from a health perspective in May. COLEF will be covering travel expenses for panelists and experts to attend this event.

Green Tec Osos will be conducting educational campaigns about used electronics at the middle and high school levels in Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass. Green Tec Osos will also be doing outreach in neighborhoods in Piedras Negras. The city of Eagle Pass will also be involved by launching a monthly used electronics event for residents.

The goal is to collect more than 50 tons in 18 months. Green Tec Osos will be joining efforts with the Secretariat of Environment in Coahuila to accomplish this task.

Dr. Rincon suggested working with the U.S. Mexico Border Health Commission to assist with speakers for the electronics symposium in May.

Gustavo Pantoja recommended searching BECC's website for more information on used electronics.

Information on the RFP, progress reports, and upcoming Border 2020 events can be found at the EPA Border 2020 website: http://www.epa.gov/border2020 and TCEQ's website: https://www.tceq.texas.gov/border/borderindex.html