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Day Zero on the border? Binational forum in Juárez raises the alarm on water supply



Martha Pskowski

El Paso Times

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Water restrictions this summer in cities like Laredo, Texas and Monterrey, Nuevo León left other Borderland residents wondering whether they might be next.

Mexican water agencies and the North American Development Bank (NADBank) hosted the First Binational Water Forum (Primera Cumbre Binacional del Agua) in Juárez in late September. Public servants, water utility managers and academics discussed pressing water challenges facing the border region.

Speakers warned that without urgent action, Juárez could face Day Zero, when the municipal water supply can no longer satisfy demand. The forum raised difficult questions of how to manage agriculture and urban development in an age of climate change and drought in the Chihuahuan Desert. The event closed with a series of proposals for water issues and plans for a second forum in 2024.

"We don't have any doubt that Day Zero could occur if we don't make necessary decisions that will affect both countries," said Mario Mata Carrasco, executive director of Chihuahua state's Junta Central de Agua y Saneamiento (JCAS, Central Water and Sanitation Board). "We can't have economic growth or territorial growth of towns and cities if we don't have sustainable water resources."

Day Zero is a concept popularized during the water crisis in Cape Town, South Africa, referring to the threshold when water demands for basic needs in a city or region exceed the water utility's supply.

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Mexican agencies invite dialogue on shared water resources

JCAS hosted the forum along with the Junta Municipal de Agua y Saneamiento de Ciudad Juárez (JMAS, Municipal Water and Sanitary Board of Juárez) and the NADBank. Forty speakers presented over two days on topics including transborder aquifers, climate change, drought and the human right to water.

El Paso Mayor Oscar Leeser, Chihuahua Gov. María Eugenia Campos Galván and Juárez Mayor Cruz Pérez Cuéllar took part in the forum's opening ceremony. Mexico's Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard was originally scheduled to speak Friday but canceled his appearance to attend the United National General Assembly in New York City.

"Today the call is very clear. We have to take on the challenge of water as one binational community," Campos Galván said in her remarks.

"On the U.S.-Mexico border, it is extremely important that we work simultaneously on water challenges and future plans for our region," Leeser said in an emailed statement. "Meeting in person to do so not only gets us closer to shared goals but creates a deeper level of trust by getting to know our partners better."

A recurring conference called Two Nations, One Water has also been hosted by institutions including New Mexico State University in past years. The most recent edition was a virtual conference in 2021.

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Unequal water infrastructure in El Paso and Juárez

JMAS executive director Sergio Nevárez said that because Juárez delayed action on water management, it now faces the urgent task of diversifying water sources and reducing per capita consumption. According to the 2020 Mexican census, Ciudad Juárez has over 1.5 million residents.

"Climate change has increased the pressure on water utilities around the world, but especially in dry places like here in El Paso-Juárez," Nevárez said.

Juárez currently relies on the Hueco-Mesilla Bolson aquifer for its municipal drinking water. Treated wastewater, known as purple pipe or "línea morada," is used for some purposes like watering parks. Water deliveries from the Rio Grande to Juárez are used in agriculture, which is the primary water consumer in the state of Chihuahua.

"At this rate, and with the growth of the city, the aquifers aren't going to be enough," Nevárez said. "We're going to reach the famous Day Zero in 15 years. That's the urgency of putting water issues on the public agenda."

He said JMAS is exploring new technologies and educating the public on ways to reduce water consumption. Meanwhile, the city continues to grow with new housing developments and investment in the manufacturing sector.

"El Paso has a 20-year technological advantage on us," Nevárez said. "We have made visits to El Paso because we are very interested in how they do things. (El Paso Water CEO) John (Balliew) has opened the doors for us."

El Paso Water's Kay Bailey Hutchinson Water Treatment Plant desalinates brackish water into drinking water. El Paso Water is also investing in advanced water purification and plans to pump water from Dell City to El Paso in the future. While the technology exists, funding is often a major obstacle for water infrastructure.

"El Paso Water maintains a positive relationship with our counterparts in Juarez, and we frequently share ideas and information with one another," El Paso Water said in a statement.

Despite years of preparation, reduced water deliveries from the Rio Grande also impact El Paso. The Rio Grande watershed stretches from Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico, traversing three U.S. states and four Mexican states. A 1944 treaty determined water deliveries from the Rio Grande for the U.S. and Mexico. This year, water deliveries were below normal and the river dried in more stretches of New Mexico and Texas.

"The Rio Grande basin is dying," said Rosario Sánchez, a senior research scientist for the Texas Water Resources Institute at Texas A&M University. "We need to improve the way we manage. And by managing I mean who, when, for what? What are our priorities?"

Speakers did not agree on all the solutions — reducing water consumption in agriculture was one contentious topic — but acknowledged the need for cooperation.

"Water does not respect boundaries," Sánchez said. "The impacts we are seeing are global, so we need to act together."

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*Staff writer Martha Pskowski may be reached
at mpskowski@elpasotimes.com and [@psskow](https://twitter.com/psskow) on Twitter.*