

SWEC, NPSNM-Las Cruces, Mesilla Audubon Joint Letter, re: River Run 2020

VIA EMAIL to jayne.harkins@ibwc.gov October 1, 2020

Jayne Harkins, U.S. Commissioner International Boundary and Water Commission

Dear Commissioner Harkins:

We the undersigned organizations are writing to express our concerns about events planned for October 10 and 17, 2020 on USIBWC-managed land within the Canalization Project near Las Cruces.

The Fourth Annual “River Run” is a major off-road vehicle rally that will take place in the bed and banks of the Rio Grande starting at the Mesilla Dam on October 17. (A “mini River Run” is scheduled for October 10.) Based on last year’s attendance and the Facebook page for this year’s events (880 people “going” and 1900 people “interested” as of October 1), there will be hundreds if not thousands of vehicles of all types participating, including all-terrain vehicles, utility task vehicles, trucks and motorcycles. Organizers for this year’s main event (October 17) are directing participants to gather on land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) a short distance to the west of the Mesilla Dam, where there will be food trucks and live music. The vehicles will then enter the river bed in the vicinity of the dam beginning at 1:00 p.m. They will travel to an unspecified point upstream, possibly the Shalem Colony Trail bridge, and then return to the starting point. There will be vehicles traveling in two directions in the river bed during these events, often at high rates of speed, while others are stationary because they have gotten stuck. Based on YouTube [videos](#) of previous years’ events, participants particularly like to drive through whatever water remains in the river, deliberately skidding out, doing “donuts,” and throwing up plumes of water and mud. We have numerous concerns about this event from an environmental, safety and property damage standpoint, including:

1. We believe these events will cause harm to river-associated wildlife, including wading birds, waterfowl and fish. We are especially concerned about birds that are currently migrating through the area and depend upon pools in the river to find the food they need for sustenance on their journeys. This has already been a particularly stressful migration season for birds. You may be aware that unusually large numbers of migratory birds have been found dead in the Southwest in recent weeks, many of them severely malnourished.
2. These events will damage riparian vegetation and cause streambank erosion.
3. There is a potential for structural damage to USIBWC’s levees.
4. These events could damage two USIBWC restoration projects along the river in the stretch where these events will take place. The agency and its partners have invested significant time and money in these projects that were undertaken to comply with the 2009 Record of Decision for the Canalization Project EIS.
5. Oil and other fluids from the hundreds of participating vehicles will inevitably contaminate water and sand in the river.
6. The loud noise and dust produced by these events over many hours will create a nuisance for other river users, who enjoy walking, jogging, bicycling, picnicking, bird watching and other activities along the river, especially users of the La Llorona Park and Trail, and the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park.
7. The sheer number of vehicles moving in multiple directions in the river bed, sometimes at high rates of speed, with moments of poor traction and driver visibility,

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poses a serious safety threat to other river users, especially children and dogs playing in the river, not to mention to the participants themselves.

8. These events are a COVID-19 health risk and a violation of New Mexico's current public health [order](#) dated September 18, 2020 that prohibits mass gatherings of more than 10 people, including "outdoor parades of any sort." Participants from out-of-state may also be in violation of Governor Lujan Grisham's executive [order](#) 2020-063 which requires that visitors coming from outside the U.S. or from a state with high rates of infection, including Texas, must self-quarantine for 14 days unless they have recently tested negative for COVID-19.

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9. These events are incompatible with the City of Las Cruces' vision for the Rio Grande corridor as a focus for nature-based recreation and ecological conservation, as described in the City's Rio Grande Riparian Ecological Corridor Plan. They are also incompatible with the State of New Mexico's recent designation of a segment of the [Rio Grande Trail](#) along this stretch of the river for hiking, biking and horseback riding.

For all of these reasons, we urge you to contact the organizers of these events and explain to them that land managed by USIBWC within the Rio Grande Canalization Project is unsuitable for events such as theirs. We also urge you to coordinate with local law enforcement to make sure these events do not go forward without USIBWC authorization.

Sincerely,

Kevin Bixby, Executive Director Southwest Environmental Center  
Elaine Stachera Simon, President Mesilla Valley Audubon Society  
Carolyn Gressitt, President  
Las Cruces Chapter, Native Plant Society of New Mexico

Cc:

Michelle Lujan Grisham, Governor of NM  
Bert Cortez, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation  
Bill Childress, U.S. Bureau of Land Management Amy Leuders, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Gary Esslinger, Elephant Butte Irrigation District Mike Matthews, NM Department of Game and Fish Christy Tafoya, NM State Parks Division  
Kim Stewart, Don~a Ana Sheriff's Office  
Mark D'Antonio, Don~a Ana County District Attorney Board of County Commissioners, Don~a Ana County Las Cruces City Council  
NM Senator Jeff Steinborn  
NM Senator Mary Kay Papen  
NM Representative Micaela Cadena  
NM Representative Nathan Small  
NM Representative Rudy Martinez

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Mayor Nora Barraza, Town of Mesilla  
Dr. Gary Roemer, NMSU  
Dr. Dave Dubois, NMSU