



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
RICE UNIVERSITY

H.R. 4719 – TO ESTABLISH A SOUTHWEST BORDER REGION WATER TASK FORCE

CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE: THE WATER SYSTEM  
OF THE RIO GRANDE/RIO BRAVO

BY

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## **Critical Infrastructure: The Water System of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo**

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## **Critical Infrastructure: The Water System of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo**

Good morning.

My name is Joan Neuhaus Schaan, and I am the fellow in homeland security and terrorism at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University and a life long resident of Texas. For approximately 15 years, I have monitored and analyzed terrorist activities, first as an officer of the United States Naval Reserve, and later as the executive director of the Houston-Harris County Regional Homeland Security Advisory Council and the coordinator of the Texas Security Forum. Most of this time also has involved monitoring narcotics-related violence in the Americas in general and Mexico in particular. The following comments relate to Mexico.

For Texas, the water flow and system of dams operated by the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) are critically important to agriculture and communities along the arid route of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo. Water rights along the border have been the basis for contentious and sometimes violent disagreements for centuries, though for the last 60 years the IBWC has provided a framework for management. This critical water infrastructure, however, is vulnerable to attack.

The week before last, there were reports of a plot against Falcon Dam on the South Texas-Mexico border, possibly by the notorious Zetas. By some accounts, the reports originated from an anonymous tip to law enforcement, possibly in May. While I cannot speak to the validity of the widely reported dam threat, I can comment on the critical security issues that accompany this portion of the Rio Grande.

Destroying a dam requires access, means, knowledge and motivation. Organized crime in the region has demonstrated a facility for the first three elements. The question remains as to whether these same organizations might be motivated to carry out an attack. The scenario is not inconceivable.

First, consider access. The Rio Grande is notorious for illegal crossings of persons and drugs, and this region near Falcon Dam is no exception. In addition to numerous sightings of armed smugglers on the banks of the river, in May 2010, the Texas Department of Public Safety warned

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Texans about suspected drug cartels acting as pirates attacking recreational boaters on Falcon Reservoir. Photos from one area operated by the IBWC, taken by an unknown person, show a common scene. While the exact location of this crossing is unknown, it appears to be in the vicinity of McAllen/Reynosa and the Anzalduas International Bridge.

The access to the river is unobstructed in most areas (other than by vegetation); consequently, the waterway and infrastructure would be of relatively easy to attack, particularly by professionally trained operatives.

The second factor is the means. While many have likely heard of high-energy grenades and anti-tank weapons that have been seized by Mexican authorities, these may not be sufficient to destroy the infrastructure. What is more troubling is the discovery of plastic explosives along the Texas-Mexico border and reported mining explosive thefts in Mexico.

In addition to significant explosive power, an attack also requires knowledge of demolitions to effect serious damage to the water infrastructure. The level of sophistication required often comes with military training, and the drug cartels are suspected to harbor many former military members from Mexican and Guatemalan forces. An example of a comparable attack would be the Pemex pipeline system bombings in July and September 2007. A similar attack was suspected on the Reynosa-McAllen pipeline near the river in the vicinity of an elementary school, but it appears to have been called off by the perpetrators.

Turning to the motivation, a drug cartel's territory is regularly challenged by rivals, and alliances can be in a constant state of flux. The rivalries, in combination with pressure from the Mexican government, make a battleground of transportation routes. When control of key border crossing points (also known as "plazas") and transportation routes into the United States are disputed, violence erupts. Currently, the battles are raging not only in Juarez, but from Piedras Negras to Reynosa to Monterrey. Events previously considered unthinkable, such as the assassination of a U.S. consular official in Juarez and the grenade attack against the U.S. Consulate in Monterrey, are beginning to transpire with increasing frequency.

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Turning to the water infrastructure, an attack on the water system might be perpetrated to pressure the Mexican government (as was suggested at the time of the pipeline bombings), or it might be perpetrated to interfere with a rival's smuggling route, since most dams include a crossing point. Alternatively, an individual anonymous tip may be simply a hoax to preoccupy authorities while a contraband shipment occurs elsewhere.

I would offer that the level of violence being experienced on the border is difficult for those outside of the region to comprehend, particularly given the silencing of the press by organized crime. This violence is being waged across a body of water, the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo, in general, and the crossing points in particular. The ever-deteriorating situation and lack of reporting have given individual citizens no choice but to collect information themselves and attempt to distribute it on the Internet.

The Falcon Dam, Falcon Reservoir and crossing are located between Reynosa and Nuevo Laredo. I would like to share with you footage from brave individuals attempting to share with the world what is occurring in their communities. First is footage of the multiple gun battles that raged in early 2009 in Reynosa during the day that all Texas-Mexico border crossings were forced to close due to protests funded by the cartels. The second is evidence from a running gun battle from Reynosa to Camargo that lasted from 11:00 pm to 6:00 am in March of this year. The footage was posted on the Internet by a courageous citizen who took the video the morning after the firefight. Tamaulipas officials denied the shoot-out had occurred, but the footage shows a different story.

The testimony I offer today is a combination of official documents, press reports originating in Mexico and the United States, Internet research and first-hand accounts told to me by citizens of the United States and/or Mexico over the last three to four years. Dozens of articles detailing the terror and atrocities from a wide variety of sources can be provided to you today. In my current capacity as a research fellow with the Baker Institute, I do not have access to classified materials or drug investigations. Many of the persons I talk to will not speak publicly, because of fear for their families, property and livelihoods. The reality of the situation is so pervasive and insidious,

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citizens in the borderlands cannot fathom that those in Washington, D.C., are not aware of their plight.

When looking at this bill, I would suggest there is significant value in including parties representing the security point of view. Violence, fear and distrust dominate the climate of the borderlands, and no policy can be legitimately debated without consideration of security. Adding entities with in-depth familiarity of these issues, such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, state homeland security and law enforcement organizations, transnational policing organizations, as well as the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), could only enhance policymaking. Consideration also should be given to private landowners, as agricultural and ranching activity is often determined by access to water, and Texas property owners own the water associated with their land.

Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to take questions at any time.

Respectfully submitted,

Joan Neuhaus Schaan