

Topic Page: [Rio Grande \(Colorado–Mexico and Texas\)](#)



Image from: [Rio Grande in Field Guide to Rivers of North America](#)

Summary Article: **Rio Grande**

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THE RIO GRANDE, or the Rio Bravo del Norte, its formal Mexican name, rises in the San Juan Mountains in southeastern Colorado and then runs south for 1,885 miles through the state of New Mexico, passing Taos, Albuquerque, and Las Cruces before following the full length of the border between Texas and Mexico. The river empties into the Gulf of Mexico near Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Mexico.

Demands on the river's water from cities and agriculture all along its course continue to increase. In addition, pollution problems have been encountered due to the close proximity of hazardous waste dumps, the spilling of industrial wastes, and irrigation water returned to the main stream. Compounding the problem is a series of drought years through the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century, which further reduced the flow of what some have called The Forgotten River. The term was applied by conservationists in order to draw attention to the plight of the Rio Grande. It is believed that the river may become extinct because of overuse. Already, there are years when the waters of the river do not, in fact, reach the Gulf of Mexico, a condition shared with the Colorado River as it approaches the Gulf of California.

In 1978, a 200-mile portion of the Rio Grande was designated as a Wild and Scenic River and placed under the control of the National Park Service. The arrangement was expanded in 2000 when the Big Bend National Park in Texas established an enhanced planning program to ensure the success of the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River designation. As part of the plan the Rio Grande Partnership Team was formed to generate ideas on river management and to serve as a sounding board for suggestions generated by participating groups.

Another program aimed at monitoring the biotic resources of the Rio Grande is the Lower Rio Grande Ecosystem Initiative (LRGEI), which was established by the Biological Resources Division of the United States Geological Service (USGS). The LRGEI, covering the portion of the river extending from the Elephant Butte Reservoir in New Mexico to its mouth on the Gulf of Mexico, has a number of initiatives underway in collaboration with numerous organizations in both the United States and Mexico. Among them are the evaluation of fish contamination in the river, development of a bibliographic database of natural resources, a study of peregrine falcon reproduction within the Big Bend National Park, the establishment of a geographic information system (GIS) database of land adjacent to the Rio Grande in Mexico, and the development of an internet site for researchers.

Protection for the Rio Grande was further enhanced in 1992 with the creation of the Integrated Environmental Plan, an international initiative along the United States–Mexico border. The plan calls for both countries to monitor transboundary water sources for any forms of contamination. Coordination of the activities between the two countries is under the control of the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC).

Attention to environmental concerns was a basic attribute of the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), an economic agreement involving the United States, Canada, and Mexico. From

the onset of NAFTA, there was concern about environmental degradation along the United States–Mexico border due to increased population concentrations and industrial activity. NAFTA has insured that wastewater is properly treated, safe drinking water is available, hazardous wastes are treated appropriately, and industrial air and water pollution are regulated.

SEE ALSO:

National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (U.S.); North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); U.S. Geological Survey.

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Gerald R. Pitzl, Ph.D.
New Mexico Public Education Department

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