

THE FLUID BORDER CRISIS

South Texas agriculture is reeling from Mexico's failure to deliver essential water under a 1944 treaty.

By Diane Meyer

It was only February in the Rio Grande Valley, and already Fausto Salinas Jr. was feeding his cows a bare-bones ration.

For South Texas ranchers like Salinas, feeding cattle hay through the dry months has always been part of the job. But with no rain since August 2024, this year is shaping up to be grimmer than the last. “Right now, we’re running hay through a vertical mixer, adding a little cottonseed meal and corn just to keep them alive,” he says. “They’re not gaining weight, but at least they’re surviving.”

Salinas, a longtime Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association member, has been forced to sell one-third of

his herd. His family’s fifth-generation farm in Hidalgo and Starr counties that once provided for his cattle and crops has been left barren, the result of both an unforgiving drought and a broken promise.

This struggle isn’t just the work of Mother Nature — it’s a crisis exacerbated by politics. Under the 1944 U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty, Mexico is required to send an average of 350,000 acre-feet of water per year to the U.S. from six of its tributaries. But with Mexico’s delinquent deliveries, Texas ranchers and farmers are left in limbo. Last year, producers received negative water allocations, leaving them unable to grow essential forage crops.



Salinas' godson and nephew, Isaac Sulemana, has seen firsthand how unreliable water access has reshaped their family's operation. Once home to a diverse mix of melons, onions and vegetables, the farm has shifted focus to row crops — an adjustment driven not by market demand, but by water scarcity.

Now, in his role as chief of staff for the Hidalgo County government, Sulemana has turned his frustration into advocacy. "Water insecurity is the single biggest issue we face that is very much within human control and dictates agriculture in South Texas," he says.

As the October 2025 deadline for Mexico's water deliveries approaches, Texas ranchers and lawmakers are once again pushing for answers. But with political uncertainty on both sides of the border, the future remains as unpredictable as the rain.

TREATY FUNDAMENTALS

The 1944 U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty, officially titled *Utilization of Waters of the Colorado and Tijuana Rivers and of the Rio Grande*, was enacted Nov. 8, 1945, to address the finite nature of shared water resources and the complex, cross-border impacts of water use.

Under the treaty, the U.S. allots 1.5 million acre-feet of water annually to Mexico from the Colorado River Basin, which drains water from seven U.S. states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming — before flowing into Mexico.

In return, Mexico is required to supply 1.75 million acre-feet of water to the U.S. over a five-year period, with an annual average of 350,000 acre-feet or about 114 billion gallons. Texas is the sole user of this water, due to its geographical proximity.

Given the shared nature of these water resources, the treaty also reestablished the International Boundary Commission, founded in 1889, as the International Boundary and Water Commission. The governing body consists of one U.S. commissioner and one Mexican commissioner, both appointed by their respective presidents. Their responsibilities include managing watershed resources, addressing environmental impacts, overseeing infrastructure and regulating recreational activities.

The 1944 treaty also established two key reservoirs — Amistad near Del Rio, and Falcon near Zapata — to help manage water storage and distribution. Amistad, being deeper, retains water more efficiently, while Falcon



Fausto Salinas Jr.



Isaac Sulemana

serves the high-demand region of the Rio Grande Valley. These reservoirs supply water to more than 2.6 million people.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, which oversees water quality and rights statewide, has highly specific and regulated authority over the Rio Grande Basin. While it does not directly enforce the treaty, it helps regulate how water deliveries from Mexico impact users along the Rio Grande.

According to Commissioner Bobby Janecka, the treaty's original water allocations were based on projected economic and population growth in both countries, with an intent to divide resources equitably. He says both countries have historically engaged in diplomatic discussions through the International Boundary and Water Commission to address challenges arising from droughts and water shortages.

"On paper, it's fairly straightforward," Sulemana says. "It's a treaty that was designed to take into account all the needs of the population that were known at the time, and which seemed reasonable for the foreseeable future."

While the 1944 predictions could not foresee the population and industry booms on both sides of the border, the treaty's "binational mutual goal of sharing water as fairly as we can is timeless," Janecka says.

ONGOING SHORTCOMINGS

While the U.S. has continuously honored its water obligations to Mexico, even making monetary payments in cases where drought shorted supply, Mexico has not reciprocated.

In the current five-year cycle, which started Oct. 25, 2020, and ends Oct. 25, 2025, Mexico is astronomically behind in water deliveries.

As of March 22, Mexico has sent only 488,926 acre-feet of water, with more than 60% of its water debt remaining. Experts do not anticipate Mexico will be able to meet its five-year requirement so late in the cycle. Janecka maintains that even a strong storm system, similar to Hurricane Alex, is unlikely to fill the international reservoirs.

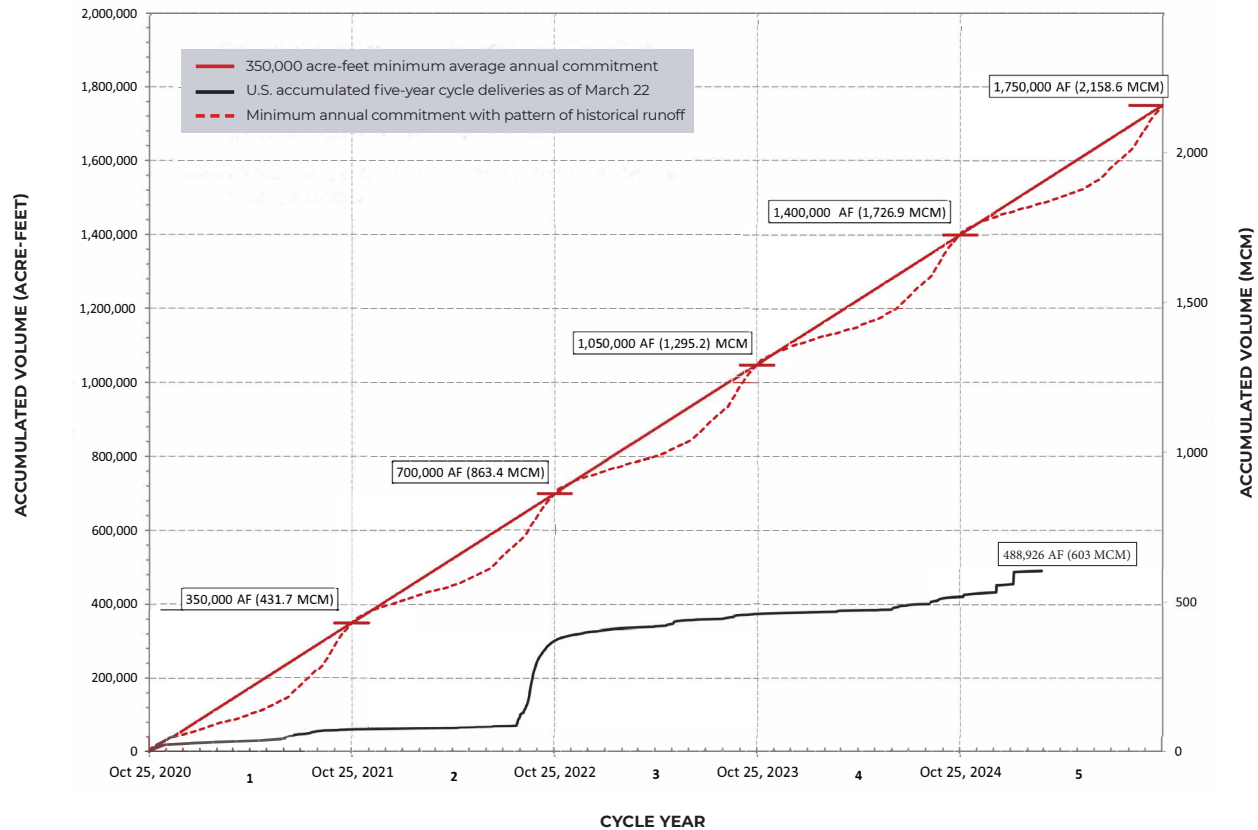


Commissioner Bobby Janecka

Even so, Mexico has a strong case for prolonging releases due to the language of the treaty, Janecka explains. For instance, they could supply zero water in four years, and all water in year five, and still meet the treaty's annual-average requirement. Alternatively, abundant rainfall could fill the international reservoirs, providing Mexico with enough water to meet its treaty obligations. Meanwhile, without sufficient yearly supplies, ranchers must sell their herds and farmers cannot plant crops.

DELAYED DELIVERIES FROM MEXICO

Estimated volumes allotted to the U.S. by Mexico from six named tributaries and other accepted sources under the 1944 water treaty. The current five-year cycle ends Oct. 25.



Source: International Boundary & Water Commission - U.S. Section

Mexico's hesitance to share water with the U.S. stems from pressing domestic challenges, including severe droughts, municipal water shortages — particularly in Mexico City — and the growing demands of its agricultural sector. The country is heavily reliant on irrigation, especially in its northern regions.

As a result, citizens and farmers demand their government prioritize domestic water needs, often complicating efforts to meet international treaty obligations. Janecka says these dynamics incite Mexico to pray for rainfall, which has largely worked.

"It's impossibly unpopular for a Mexican president to take water from their own citizens to give to Texans, particularly Texas farmers," he says. "So, they allow the rain to fall where it does and provide the water that enters the basin. But in terms of deliveries, Mexico has apparently not proactively delivered water in living memory."

In the past, when Mexico claimed there wasn't enough water to make deliveries, the U.S. had little recourse but to take them at their word. Today, technology provides a

more exact understanding of rainfall patterns and river basin conditions, making it clearer than ever that Mexico is prioritizing its own water users while leaving Texas agriculture and cities with inadequate supply.

"That's where we are in this relationship," Sulemana says. "The hard facts are that each of the last three years, we've started the year with less water in reserves than we did the year before. We've hit historical lows."

"Mexico is the furthest behind they've ever been in total amount, and at this time in the cycle," Janecka echoes. "We are in the most dire situation we've ever been in terms of where our existing supply is at this point in the growing season, heading into the next year. So, I have nothing but concern."

CONSEQUENCES

For generations, livestock and crop producers in South Texas have relied on irrigation as a safety net during drought. Access to water meant ranchers could stockpile hay, ensuring their herds had feed during dry periods.

"It wasn't unheard of to move thousands of round bales in the summer to fill orders across the region," Sulemana says. "Now, livestock producers are in a real pinch because we're so far removed from other parts of the state that if we don't have access to the irrigation water, it is almost economically impossible to keep your herd going."

Farmers like Salinas pump water from the Rio Grande or receive allocations from irrigation districts. Once requested, water released from Falcon Lake — a reservoir supplied by Mexico's San Juan River — traditionally took three to five days to reach farms. Now, Salinas is waiting 10 days or longer.

When water levels drop below historical thresholds, producers experience drastic reductions in allocations, even if they legally own the water. In extreme cases, like lately, they risk receiving negative allocations, meaning water can be deducted from their balance despite no usage. "This makes it nearly impossible to plan a production year, obtain financing or secure crop insurance," Sulemana says. "Without those, you're out of business."

This water shortage creates a tumultuous domino effect. Without irrigation, crop yields plummet, forcing cattle ranchers to buy expensive hay instead of growing their own. In Salinas' case, strong cattle prices have helped offset hay costs. But if the situation worsens and he must sell more cattle, he fears the costs of rebuilding later will be too great.

These threats extend to all agriculture systems. South Texas' sugar industry recently collapsed from inconsistent irrigation after 70 years of strong production. Experts fear the area's citrus industry will crumble next. As these enterprises falter, local economies suffer, leading to job losses, underfunded schools, rising food insecurity and crime.

On a national level, Sulemana stresses the danger of losing control over critical inputs like food supply. "This is a national security threat to the United States, and it's something that we need Washington to really step up and take note of because this is no longer an annoyance or local economic issue," he says.

WINDINGS PATHS AHEAD

Enforcing the U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty remains a significant challenge, especially as both nations navigate water scarcity and food security. While direct enforcement mechanisms are limited, the treaty allows for minutes, or subsequent agreements, to be adopted



By February, South Texas rancher Fausto Salinas Jr. was feeding a limited ration to his cow-calf herd, pictured top. The state's citrus industry is also struggling as the Rio Grande Valley awaits water deliveries from Mexico, which is released from international reservoirs like Amistad, pictured bottom.

HOW MUCH WATER ARE WE TALKING?

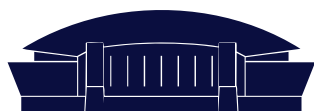
Mexico is responsible for delivering an annual average of 350,000 acre-feet — about 114 billion gallons — of water to South Texas. For perspective:



Empire State Building

It could fill the
Empire State Building
412 TIMES.

It could fill
Dallas Cowboys'
AT&T Stadium over
146 TIMES.



AT&T Stadium



Big Bend
National Park

It would create a
5-INCH-DEEP
lake across Big Bend
National Park.

About **1.2%** of Lake Mead's
full capacity of
28.9 MILLION
acre-feet.



Lake Mead

without legislative approval from Washington, D.C., and Mexico City. According to Janecka, minutes are adopted routinely and allow for important progress.

The most recent November 2024 development, Minute 331, marks a historic shift by granting Mexico greater flexibility in water deliveries to the U.S. Previously, Mexico could only provide additional water under specific conditions, such as when attempting to meet past-due obligations.

Now, Mexico can deliver excess water at any time, allowing for improved resource management. Minute 331 also includes a controversial provision allowing Mexico to receive treaty credit for water releases from tributaries below Amistad and Falcon reservoirs, such as the San Juan River, which U.S. users historically viewed as free water.

Janecka believes that while the International Boundary and Water Commission and state-level negotiations provide a foundation for collaborative discussions, meaningful progress is inhibited by deeper political and economic factors. One pressing issue is the influence of illicit actors like cartel-affiliated groups exerting control over water distribution in Mexico, ensuring resources are directed to their allies while independent farmers are left without. This gray-market water economy complicates enforcement efforts beyond the commission's jurisdiction.

Given these realities, experts say the U.S. must find ways to encourage Mexico to fully utilize its new flexibility under Minute 331. Potential approaches include diplomatic negotiations, economic incentives or leveraging trade agreements to push for compliance. Janecka suggests the U.S. has been too passive in asserting its rights under the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement and could use trade pressure to challenge Mexico's water policies, which disproportionately benefit Mexican farmers while harming U.S. agricultural interests.

Securing water from Mexico has typically required strong advocacy from U.S. representatives and pressure from the State Department. However, with the Rio Grande Valley holding only two congressional seats, the region has struggled to gain national attention.

U.S. Rep. Monica De La Cruz, a District 15 Republican, is among the lawmakers pushing for stronger enforcement mechanisms. In November 2024, she introduced House Resolution 10113, the South Texas Agriculture Emergency Assistance Act, to provide financial relief to Texas farmers along the Rio Grande.

"Mexico's repeated failure to uphold their end of the 1944 Water Treaty has devastated South Texas farmers, hurt the growth of our Texas agriculture economy, and threatened our national food security," De La Cruz shared in a written statement. "That is why I have led efforts in Congress to bring national attention to this issue and advocate for the resources Texas farmers desperately need."

"I am working closely with President Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio to hold Mexico accountable for the water they owe the U.S. as part of the ongoing trade negotiations. The ultimate goal is to have the 1944 Water Treaty included in the USMCA."

On March 19, De La Cruz and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins announced \$280 million in USDA aid for South Texas farmers. That same day, the Texas Senate adopted Senate Concurrent Resolution 13, a resolution by Sen. Adam Hinojosa urging federal officials to ensure Mexico fulfills its treaty obligations.

Supported by the Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, the resolution was received by the Texas House on March 20. At time of press, House Concurrent Resolution 77, the companion legislation authored by Rep. Oscar Longoria, remains pending in the House Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs.

As a result of the treaty's ongoing shortcomings, the State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs took a firm stance on the issue. On the social

platform X March 20, the bureau announced, "Today, for the first time, the U.S. will deny Mexico's non-treaty request for a special delivery channel for Colorado River water to be delivered to Tijuana."



**U.S. Rep. Monica
De La Cruz**

Though legislative tides are changing, Janecka, Sulemana and Salinas all iterate that uncertainty is the biggest limiting factor in how South Texas producers waded through the water shortages.

"Right now, nothing is guaranteed," Salinas says. "Everything is a big question mark, and that's what makes it hard."

He dreams of one day expanding into feeder calf production and backgrounding, but those ambitions are out of reach under the current conditions. Despite the challenges, he remains committed to his way of life.

"I love what I do," Salinas says. "I would not change it for anything in the world. I love farming and watching the crops come out of the ground. There's nothing better than seeing a two- or three-week-old heifer or bull calf in the pasture that just catches your eye."

Sulemana remains passionate about preserving a livelihood near and dear to his family, and the entire Rio Grande Valley region. "We ask producers everywhere to join us in advocating for a solution to this problem," he says. "Every drop we're owed is, or has been, right across the border." 🇺🇸

Diane Meyer is the associate director of content for Grant Company based in St. Joseph, Missouri.

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— Fausto Salinas Jr., *Sullivan City*
