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Fears of repeat of 2006 flooding spur talk of control authority

By Diana M. Alba Sun-News reporter

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To view a rough draft of legislation that would be needed to create a flood control authority, [click here](#).

LAS CRUCES - Though it's been more than three years since the flooding that devastated Hatch, those in the know about all things water-related say not much has improved since then.

"That happened in '06, and nothing has changed up there," said Joe Delk, chairman of a new task force looking at flooding. "It could happen again tomorrow."

Delk said that's why the task force is floating the idea of creating a flood control authority in Doña Ana County, similar to one in Albuquerque. The authority would put bond questions before voters to pay for flood control projects, such as dams, channels and ponds.

The first step, however, would be an authorization by the Legislature, which, at best, could take one or two years.

Problems across the county now, Delk said, are because there's not a steady source of funding for costly flood control projects, and there's no broad system in place for fixing problems. Plus, he said there's not enough coordination among city and county officials, though floodwaters from one

routinely affect the other.

The group, called the Stormwater and Watershed Infrastructure Management task force, or SWIM, formed in January. It's been gathering maps and other information as a first step, said Valerie Beversdorf, GIS director for Elephant Butte Irrigation District.

Of the 2,400 square miles that make up a basin stretching from Caballo to southern Do-a Ana County, about one-third of the acreage has no infrastructure to slow or stop flooding, Beversdorf said.

About 40 of the most knowledgeable people about flood problems in the county attended a SWIM meeting Tuesday at the Do-a Ana County Government Center.

In addition to easing flood issues, EBID manager Gary Esslinger said his district also is interested in collecting stormwater. Up until 2008, local run-off had to flow to the Rio Grande, for use by El Paso's irrigation district. But an agreement between the two districts now allows EBID to keep whatever run-off it can collect.

It's "clearly an opportunity to capture this stormwater and re-use it," he said.

Tuesday, the group heard advice from two officials with ties to the Albuquerque and Sandoval County flood control authorities.

Delk said he didn't know about the lack of flood control infrastructure across the county until he joined the board of the La Union Soil and Water Conservation District last fall. It was then he learned that group owns 42 aging flood control dams

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across the county.

The dams need upgrading because of increased urbanization, but there's no funding source to pay for improvements.

"I couldn't believe it," he said.

Delk said SWIM also is concerned about the impacts of a proposed wilderness bill on any future flood control projects.

He said flood problems have been overlooked on a large scale for the past 30 years, something that will have to change.

"A lot of us feel like if we don't take advantage of this opportunity and we let it die, it won't get cranked up again," he said.

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