



5

LOWER RIO GRANDE

THREAT: Water scarcity, overallocation, aging infrastructure, harmful border policies

STATES: Texas (United States), Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas (México)

AT RISK: Public health, drinking water security, wildlife, local economies, binational cooperation

SUMMARY

The Rio Grande is an icon of the west and lifeblood of the American Southwest, providing water and life to over 6 million people. The river is a vital economic, cultural, and ecological resource for people and wildlife of the United States and Mexico. But despite its immense value to people and nature, the river has been under constant threat for decades. Today, the danger is nowhere more urgent than in the Lower Rio Grande basin where water scarcity, pollution, and overallocation harm the river and communities that rely on it. The recent Minute 331 agreement established a Binational Environmental Working Group, creating a critical opportunity to advance conservation efforts and advocate for much-needed federal funding to ensure the river can continue to support people and nature.

THE RIVER

The Rio Grande — also known as the Rio Bravo del Norte in Mexico — is the third longest river in the United States and the source of water for over 6 million people. For those in the lower basin, it is often the only source of drinking water. From its headwaters in the San Juan Mountains of southern Colorado, the main stem stretches approximately 1,990 miles through diverse geographies of forest and desert, cliffs and flatlands, until it reaches its final destination at the Gulf.

The springs and streams that feed the river support an invaluable agricultural economy and provide a crucial stop for several of the Western Hemisphere's largest migratory flyways. They are home to various highly prized birds and pollinators, including the endangered Monarch butterfly. South Texans rely on the Rio Grande and its reservoirs, Amistad and Falcon, for their drinking water, and these reservoirs also serve as critical recreational and ecological assets. Despite this, investment in the Rio Grande basin remains low compared to other major U.S. river systems.

THE THREAT

Severe water scarcity driven by prolonged drought, intensifying heat, and unsustainable water use has left the Rio Grande in a near-permanent human-induced megadrought, threatening all life that depends on it. The river frequently runs dry in Big Bend National Park, changing the ecological integrity, disrupting agricultural production, and jeopardizing clean, reliable drinking water for hundreds of communities and millions of people in the lower basin. Today, less than one-fifth of the river's flows reach the sea.

However, a recent agreement between the U.S. and Mexico, presents a major opportunity to enhance river flows and water security for both people and wildlife. The International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), a federal agency that oversees the river through treaties, recently signed Minute 331. This agreement

RAUL DELGADO

5

LOWER RIO GRANDE

Continued

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

MATT RICE

Southwest Regional Director
American Rivers
803-422-5244
mrice@americanrivers.org

CHANTEL DOMINGUEZ

Community Engagement
and Campaigns Director
American Rivers
775-762-1755
cdominguez@americanrivers.org

TRICIA CORTEZ

Executive Director
Rio Grande International Study Center
956-319-4374
tricia@rgisc.org

MARTIN CASTRO

Watershed Science Director
Rio Grande International Study Center
956-285-8313
martin@rgisc.org

TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/
LOWERRIOGRANDE2025](https://www.americanrivers.org/lowerriogrande2025)



FRANCISCO MENDOZA

focuses on improving the reliability of river flows and establishes a long-awaited Binational Environmental Working Group, allowing for coordinated conservation efforts, scientific assessments, and water management strategies. Yet, despite this progress, the Rio Grande received little to no federal funding from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), while other domestic river basins secured billions for water conservation and infrastructure. Without similar investment, restoration efforts will remain underfunded.

The lack of public engagement opportunities for Minute 331's implementation further limits

community involvement in shaping the river's future. IBWC data shows that water inflows into the Rio Grande have diminished by more than 30 percent, yet the causes remain insufficiently studied. If the federal government does not prioritize investments in this river, continued neglect will further threaten the communities and ecosystems that rely on it.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

It is essential that Mexico, the United States, and water users build on their collaborative efforts and continue working together to fund and implement key provisions of Minute 331. By doing so, they can help sustain the Rio Grande's flow, ensuring water security for people, farms, and the environment. A thriving river supports thriving communities — protecting the Rio Grande means securing clean, reliable drinking water for millions and restoring its natural hydrological functions.

We urge federal policymakers to prioritize dedicated funding for the Rio Grande, as their support is critical in securing federal appropriations. Investments are critical for conservation efforts, water security, and for ongoing and future repairs of Amistad Dam, both of which are vital for the region's water supply and safety. Moreover, investments and prioritization in water quality and access can increase recreational uses, and a more balanced approach between security and ecology can shift our river's narrative into a more uplifting and positive light.