



International Boundary and Water Commission United States Section

For immediate release
January 30, 2023

USIBWC SCHEDULES PUBLIC MEETINGS JANUARY 31 – FEBRUARY 2 ABOUT FALCON DAM GRAZING PROGRAM

The United States Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC) is seeking public input on its grazing program in Starr and Zapata Counties. The public is invited to attend any of the meetings as follows:

- January 31, 5:30 – 7:30 p.m. CST, Joe A. Guerra Laredo Public Library, 1120 E. Calton Road, Laredo, TX 78041
- February 1, 5:30 – 7:30 p.m. CST, Zapata County Museum of History, 805 N. U.S. Highway 83, Zapata, TX 78076
- February 2, 5:30 – 7:30 p.m. CST, Roma Community Center, 601 6th Street, Roma, TX 78584

The USIBWC is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act to assess the potential environmental consequences associated with land management and grazing leases, licenses, and permits on USIBWC property surrounding Falcon Dam and Reservoir in Starr and Zapata Counties, Texas. Currently, there are approximately 117 active grazing leases and 243 other types of licenses and permits. The public scoping meetings will be held in an open-house format, providing additional information and inviting comments.

The USIBWC has identified a number of concerns with the current grazing lease program, including some of the grazing leases are not accessible for inspection by USIBWC, charges to lessees have not changed since 1966, some leases may have been transferred to third parties without authorization, and grazing may impact sensitive resources.

The USIBWC is seeking input on various proposed management alternatives as detailed on the attached Fact Sheet, including charging a fair market value for grazing leases, modifying

lease conditions to allow hunting and/or prescribed burning, canceling some or all grazing leases, or maintaining the status quo.

Written comments may be sent to Mr. Mark Howe via email at falconcomments@ibwc.gov or by mail to USIBWC, 4191 North Mesa Street, El Paso, Texas 79902-1423. Comments are requested by March 3, 2023.

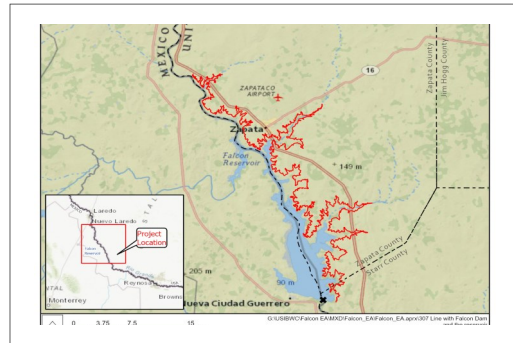
News Media Contact:

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International Falcon Dam and Reservoir

The International Falcon Dam and Reservoir are located approximately 75 miles southeast of Laredo, Texas, and 150 miles upstream of the mouth of the Rio Grande on both sides of the United States/Mexico border. Falcon Dam and Reservoir provide flood control, conservation, and hydroelectric power and were constructed by the United



Falcon Project and 307-Foot Taking Line

the American-Mexican Treaty Act in September 1950. Construction started in 1950 and was completed in 1954. Both the United States and Mexico control floodwaters and conserve and utilize an allotted share of the waters of the Rio Grande.

States and Mexico under the 1944 Water Treaty. The United States' portion of the construction, operation, and maintenance was authorized by

The Falcon Project includes 63,192 acres of Federal lands managed by the U.S. Section, International Boundary and Water Commission, of which 22,270.57 acres are in active grazing leases.



Falcon Dam is a 5-mile-long rolled earth and rock embankment structure with a concrete spillway; 2 miles of Falcon Dam are on the United States side and 3 miles of Falcon Dam are on the Mexican side of the United States/Mexico border. Falcon Reservoir has a total capacity of

3,978,416 acre-feet; 2,667,000 acre-feet of that capacity are for conservation of floodwaters, which is for release as required for beneficial uses downstream in the United States and Mexico. The remaining storage capacity of 1,310,828 acre-feet is for flood control. The spillway capacity

is 456,000 cubic feet per second. The drainage area above Falcon Dam is 164,482 square miles, of which 87,760 square miles are in the United States. Since 2001, the water levels have ranged from a low of 247 feet to a high of 306.7 feet.

Federal Lands

Federal lands available for lease are at the water-land interface below the 307-foot traverse taking line/contour line, with some ingress up to the 314-foot taking line/contour line. Land between the 307-foot taking line and the 314-foot taking line is private; however, this private land cannot be built upon as this

is in the flood pool level for a 100-year flood. The Grazing Lease Program has continued for areas along the lake that were originally ranches and farms before the land was acquired by the government. This grazing program was to assure that areas that were not underwater or flooded would be economically

used as they were in the past by the local community. Initially leases allowed for agricultural uses in addition to grazing, but agricultural activities and any clearing of leased lands were later restricted to reduce potential impacts on cultural resources. Active leases only allow for grazing activities.

Current Grazing Leases

In the past, 22,270.57 acres of land were under 159 active grazing leases. As of 2020, there were 117 active grazing leases with many that are still held by the same permittees and/or stakeholders. Stakeholders may also be nonpermittee individuals or entities with a vested interest in this project. A total of 243 licenses, 1 general license, 3 oil and gas leases, and 3 permits pertain to other endeavors aside from the grazing leases. Lands covered by the additional

250 licenses, leases, and permits may also have grazing permits. In August 2022, the Falcon Project grazing lease boundaries were digitized. In total, 148 separate leases were identified, and the boundaries of those leases were entered into a geodatabase. Subsequently, a site assessment in August 2022 of select leases determined that locked gates limited USIBWC's ability to access grazing leases and many leases



Access Gate to a Grazing Lease

are not accessible directly from public highways and require crossing private property for access.



Grazing Lease Values

Grazing leases were established in 1956. The original 1956 grazing leases included annual rental charges of \$25.00, plus the sum of \$0.05 (five cents) per acre per year for the number of acres leased in excess of 500 acres. Subsequently, in 1966, rental charges

for leasing of Falcon Project lands were revised to \$0.20 (20 cents) per acre per year, with a minimum annual rental charge of \$7.50. This adjustment was made to comply with government directives that income to the government from the lease of land must be sufficient to

cover administrative costs and to correct certain inequalities in the old rate of charges. Rental charges have remained at this rate of \$0.20 per acre from 1966 to the present. Annual rent charges for all leases totals \$17,025.68.

The primary problems with the land lease program to be addressed by USIBWC are low grazing lease values and grazing lease management.

Current Grazing Lease Management

Lease Access—Currently, USIBWC lacks access to many lands with grazing leases as private landowners have locked gates that prevent USIBWC from gaining access to its own lands.

Sensitive Resources—Potential for sensitive cultural resources and, to a lesser extent, biological

resources on grazing leases are critical management issues.

Land Use Limitations—Leases only allow grazing activities.

Compliance—Leased lands need to be monitored for compliance with lease conditions.

Vegetation Management—Low water levels in Falcon Reservoir have allowed woody vegetation to become established in areas of grazing leases that were periodically inundated by changing reservoir levels.

Lease Transfers—Transfer of grazing leases is currently not permitted.



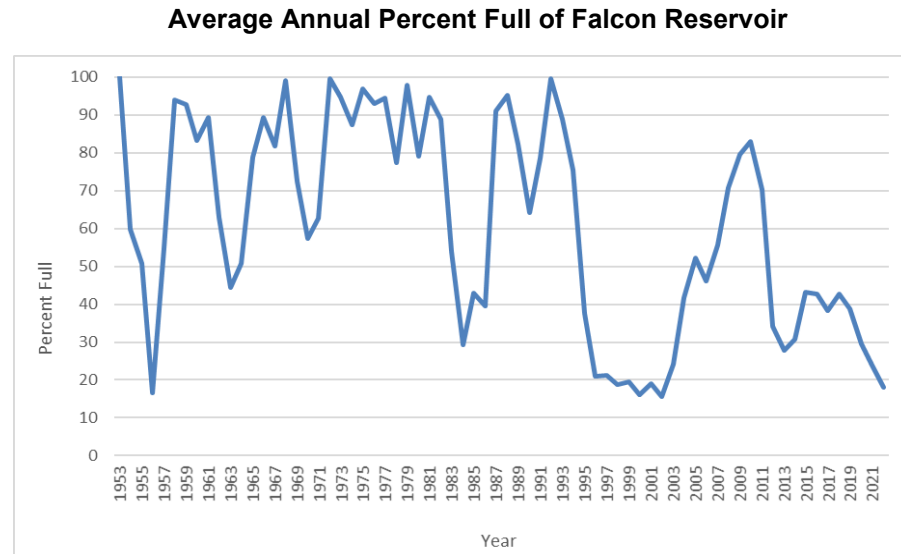
Public Comment

Anyone that would like to provide comments or suggestions relevant to the project and the proposed alternatives may do so at the scoping meetings via a comment form, via email, or via mail.

Email: falconcomments@ibwc.gov

Mail: U.S. Section, International Boundary and Water Commission
Attn: Mark Howe
4191 North Mesa St.
El Paso, TX 79902-1423

To ensure your comments are considered in the Draft EA, please submit your comments by **3 March 2023**.



Falcon Reservoir has not been at 100 percent of capacity since February 2011. In 2022, Falcon Reservoir averaged 18 percent of overall capacity. Alternative vegetation management in grazing leases is needed if leases are going to be successful and productively used for grazing, until such time that Falcon Reservoir water levels increase, inundate woody vegetation, and return to seasonal cycles of flooding and drying of leased lands.

Management Alternatives

Seven alternatives were developed for future lease management. These seven action alternatives could be implemented independently or as a combination of alternatives.

Alternative 1. No Action—Maintain the status quo.

Alternative 2. Terminate All Leases—All active leases would be canceled in accordance with the termination paragraph, Paragraph 13(c), in the grazing leases.

Alternative 3. Change Rental Rates on Active Leases—Charge a fair market value for grazing



Gated Access to Grazing Leases

leases at the Falcon Project.

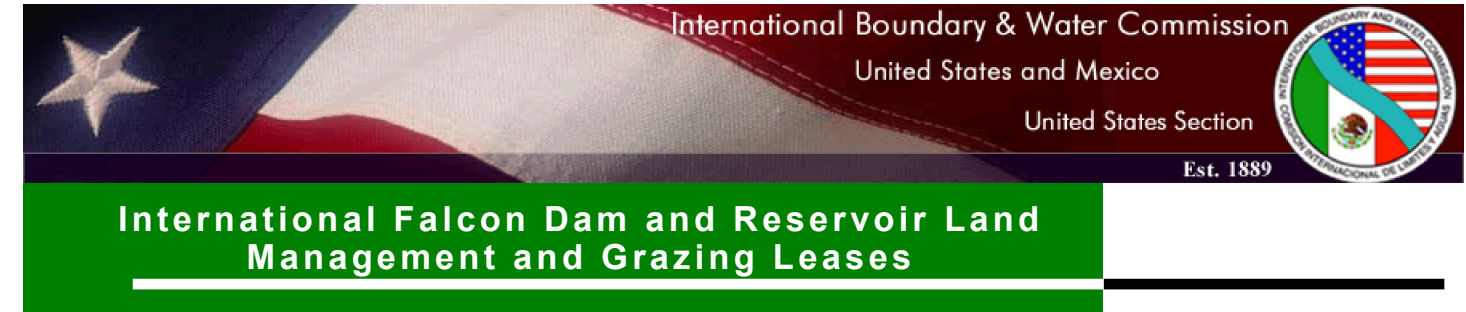
Alternative 4. Allow Hunting—Modify lease conditions to allow hunting.

Alternative 5. Terminate Leases Not Accessible from Public Rights-of-Way—Cancel all grazing leases not directly acces-

sible from a public right-of-way.

Alternative 6. Negotiate Access Easements on Private Property for Existing Leases—Private landowners would be contacted in an attempt to negotiate an access easement across their property to the USIBWC-owned grazing lease.

Alternative 7. Amend Leases to Allow Prescribed Burning—Grazing leases would be amended to allow prescribed burning following the requirements of a Wildland Fire Management Plan.



Scoping Process

The scoping process outlines potential issues, points of contact, project schedules, and ways for the public to be involved. Public scoping meetings can be conducted to provide the public an opportunity to learn about the proposed action and provide input into the environmental impact analysis process. Comments received during the public scoping process are considered in the preparation of the draft EA.

Scoping Meetings

Scoping meetings will be held from 5:30 pm to 7:30 pm at the following dates and locations:

January 31, 2023

Joe A. Guerra Laredo Public Library
1120 E. Calton Rd.
Laredo, TX 78041

February 1, 2023

Zapata County Museum of History
805 N US Hwy 83
Zapata, TX 78076

February 2, 2023

Roma Community Center
601 6th Street
Roma, TX 78584

National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires Federal agencies to assess the environmental effects of their Proposed Actions prior to making decisions. Actions can be defined as projects, policies, permitting, regulations, and licensing. An Environmental Assessment (EA) is then prepared by an agency for any proposed action that is not likely to have significant effects or when the significance of the effects of the proposed action is unknown.

An EA will determine whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact; discuss the purpose and need for the proposed action, alternatives, and the environmental impacts



Falcon Reservoir, Zapata County, Texas

of the proposed action and alternatives; and include a listing of agencies and persons consulted.

The U.S. Section, International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC) is preparing an EA to evalu-

ate the impacts on the human and natural environment of land management and grazing leases at the Falcon Project in Starr and Zapata Counties, Texas.

Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

The purpose is to manage Federal land in the Falcon Project. The United States jurisdictional boundary in the Falcon Reservoir is up to the 307-foot traverse taking line or contour line, from the Webb County—Zapata County Line at

Arroyo Dolores south to Falcon Dam.

The need is to develop land management alternatives to the current grazing lease program on Federal lands in the Falcon Project. A total of 159 grazing

leases were originally provided to the public on Federal lands in the Falcon Project. There are currently 117 active grazing leases that total 22,270.57 acres.