

Wetlands become a focus in debate over canal lining **By Sandra Dibble**

COLORADO RIVER DELTA, Mexico – Surrounded by sand dunes that rise outside Mexicali, they appear like small oases where hawks soar, doves coo and cattails quiver in the morning breeze.

For decades, nobody knew much about Mexico's Andrade Mesa wetlands. Covering some 8,000 acres, they lay hidden near the U.S. border. Now they have become a focal point in a delicate binational debate over water rights in this parched region.

In all likelihood, environmentalists say, the wetlands were created by man. Although there's no conclusive proof, many believe they are nourished by seepage through the sandy soil from the unlined All-American Canal, which for more than five decades has carried Colorado River water to the Imperial Valley. Now they fear that man's actions could eliminate the wetlands, as a U.S. water-conservation project would line a 23-mile stretch of the canal with concrete by 2008.

Despite protests in Mexico, the U.S. government has shown no intention of backing down from its decision. The water that seeps out of the canal is part of California's 4.4 million annual acre-foot share allotted under the Colorado River Compact, forged in 1922 among seven Western U.S. states. The water that is saved, more than 67,000 acre-feet per year – enough to supply 134,000 households – would be sent to San Diego County.

But environmentalists on both sides of the border say that lining the canal threatens an important bird habitat in this isolated northern stretch of the Colorado River Delta.

In a study for Mexico's environmental ministry, Semarnat, the Mexican conservation group Pronatura documented more than 100 bird species in the wetlands, and it lists the area as a key habitat for the endangered Yuma clapper rail and the California black rail.

For birds on the Pacific flyway, "the wetlands are a crucial stepping stone," said

Exequiel Ezcurra, director of scientific research at the San Diego Museum of Natural History, and until recently director of Mexico's National Institute of Ecology.

For years, the loudest protests came from growers in the Mexicali Valley whose wells are fed by seepage from the canal; the Baja California government estimates that the lining will affect nearly 3,000 acres of prime agricultural land in the valley's northwest corner.

But in recent months, the environmental question has increasingly emerged. The topic is a "hot potato that everyone is passing around," Ezcurra said. "It's a complicated issue because legally the water belongs to the United States. The case that Mexico is making is a case of acquired rights, which is very common in water issues all over the world."

A coalition of conservationists from both sides of the border lists the wetlands as a conservation priority in a recently released report about the Colorado River Delta, a once-lush region damaged because so much water is diverted upstream.

Studies commissioned by Mexico's federal government and the state of Baja California and released this year are the first to document the wetlands' species and habitats.

A California environmental group has joined with a Mexicali business group to threaten legal action against the U.S. government if the project – which is scheduled to begin by spring 2006 and be complete by the end of 2008 – is carried forward.

A May 17 letter sent by the Citizens United for Resources and the Environment and the Consejo de Desarrollo Economico de Mexicali accuses the U.S. Interior Department and three of its agencies of failing to properly take into account the environmental and economic impacts on both sides of the border of lining the canal.

Mexico's federal government has long objected to the lining project, broaching the subject discretely with the U.S. State Department. The government officials are continuing to seek out their U.S. counterparts, pointing out the likely effects south of the border if the canal lining goes through.

"We're pushing hard to see what can be done to avoid this, and if the project has to happen, then to find mitigation alternatives," said Enrique Villegas Ibarra, Baja California's director of ecology.

Mexico's environmental secretary, Alberto Cárdenas, has sent two communiques

to U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton seeking review of environmental issues, Villegas said. "The responses from the United States were not very encouraging in terms of finding paths to a solution," he said.

The wetlands issue came up during recent negotiations between the United States and Mexico, said Sally Spener, spokeswoman for the U.S. branch of the International Boundary and Water Commission, a U.S.-Mexico panel created to negotiate border issues. "We are looking at a number of options to address Mexico's concerns," Spener said, without mentioning specific proposals.

Just finding the Andrade wetlands can be a challenge. Located about 20 miles east of downtown Mexicali and 2 to 4 miles south of the border, there are no signs pointing the way. A mile from the nearest paved road, well beyond the last irrigated wheat field, past sand dunes covered with mesquite, small lagoons suddenly appear.

"It's difficult to replace these," said Francisco Zamora Arroyo of the Sonoran Institute, a Tucson-based conservation group, as he watched ducks skim the water. "This is unique, this type of lagoon, the cattails surrounded by dunes. You don't see this anywhere in the delta."

The Andrade Mesa wetlands cover more than 8,000 acres, Zamora said; about 500 acres are marsh, with the rest terrestrial habitat that includes dunes and mesquite vegetation.

For years, few people knew the wetlands existed. The first surveys were conducted in 2002. If the lining is implemented, "these wetlands would likely disappear," states the joint report by Pronatura and the Sonoran Institute.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation studied the environmental impact of the canal-lining project, but its assessment stopped at the Mexican border. U.S. officials have maintained that the project's 1994 environmental impact statement, which was reviewed in 1998 and 2002, meets all legal requirements.

The Bureau of Reclamation, which owns the All-American Canal, declined to discuss the issue last week, citing the potential for litigation. "It's premature for us to address the issue at this point," said Bob Walsh, spokesman for the bureau's Lower Colorado River office.

Chuck Keene, of California's Department of Water Resources, the primary funder of the project, said measures are being taken to protect or replace California wetlands that could be affected by the project, which will cost an estimated \$180 million to \$293 million.

"We don't have an authority to mitigate on the Mexican side of the border," Keene said.

But Mexico and environmental groups from both sides challenge that assertion.

The Sonoran Institute and Pronatura state in their report that Mexico "could legitimately request the preparation of a supplemental (environmental impact study) in order to better document the potential impacts" of the canal-lining project.

If the canal lining goes through, San Diego County would be the beneficiary: The San Diego County Water Authority would receive 56,200 acre-feet, with the remaining 11,500 going to the San Luis Rey Indian Reservation to settle a decades-old legal fight.

The project is key to an agreement reached in October 2003 to transfer water from the Imperial Valley to San Diego. The water conservation plan was intended to enable California to live within its share of Colorado River water.

U.S. and Mexican officials say there is little likelihood the project will be stopped.

Ezcurra and others say the United States and Mexico must do more to share decisions involving water in the border regions, and they point to the All-American Canal lining project as an example. "Both countries have planned badly the use of water, and are using water inefficiently," Ezcurra said, "and both countries need each other to resolve these issues."