

03/06/2006**FEMA provides grant to TAMIU joint effort for hazard planning****SPECIAL TO THE TIMES**

Texas A&M International University has received a planning grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Grant Program for a joint effort with Texas A&M University and the Rio Grande Institute for a "Cover the Texas-Mexico Border" Hazard Mitigation Planning Initiative.

The three-year grant, beginning in January 2006, provides \$391,481 to develop a comprehensive, multi-jurisdictional regional hazard mitigation plan for jurisdictions in 10 counties in the Rio Grande border region.

Counties participating are Starr, Jim Hogg, Webb, Duval, Brooks, McMullen, Terrell, Pecos, Reeves and Kenedy, with a combined population of 305,212.

Hazard mitigation planning is a unique challenge for these counties. The vast majority of communities in the region are small and without a budget for the kind of planning required to meet the increasingly stringent federal disaster prevention standards. The area's population is growing at a rapid rate and expected to increase by about 26 percent between 2000 and 2010.

To develop this regional hazard mitigation plan, TAMIU has assembled an experienced team headed by project director Kenneth Tobin, TAMIU assistant professor of geology and GIS and director of its Center for Earth and Environmental Studies.

Partners in the effort are Laurel Lacy and colleagues from H2O Partners, Inc. in Austin, and Tyrus Fain and Len Materman from the Rio Grande Institute. The latter have extensive experience working with the jurisdictions along the Texas-Mexico border.

H2O Partners has completed hazard mitigation plans for more than 100 counties in Texas. Materman and Lacy both occupied senior positions at FEMA headquarters during the 1990s.

Tyrus Fain, president of the Rio Grande Institute, said the Rio Grande region is at a growing risk of disaster.

"This Rio Grande region is at high and growing risk of disaster - both natural and man-made - and from events on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Together, the counties received a total of eight Presidential Disaster Declarations from 1989 to 2003," Fain said.

"Cover the Texas-Mexico Border" is intended as a disaster prevention blueprint for the future for participating jurisdictions and targets actions that can be taken to make the 10-county region more disaster-resistant by reducing or eliminating the risks of loss of life and property damage from disasters.

When confronted by natural or man-caused disasters, communities that have well-developed mitigation programs will sustain fewer losses and recover more quickly.

Fain said the timing of the Grant couldn't be more appropriate.

"The problem of protecting lives and property along the Rio Grande has become ever more critical as weather patterns change, population grows rapidly, once sparsely populated areas witness a rapid expansion of homes and businesses into the floodplain, and as new man-made threats such as terrorism emerge," he explained.

Tobin is hopeful that the group's multi-jurisdictional plan will lay the groundwork for future funding that may become available from state or federal grants and technical assistance programs. This plan will enable the participating jurisdictions to take advantage of mitigation grant opportunities as soon as they arise.

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