



Event Brief

Exploring New Mechanisms of **Cooperation** for the Future of the 1944 US-Mexico Water Treaty

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A binational dialogue towards the next water cycle of the 1944 Water treaty

On October 23, 2025, the Permanent Forum of Binational Waters (PFBW) hosted one of its signature online events, a Coffee Break titled “Exploring New Mechanisms of Cooperation for the Future of the 1944 U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty.”

The purpose of this event was to initiate a conversation among experts from both sides of the border about the present and future of the Treaty, in light of the upcoming negotiations for the next five-year cycle. This brief summarizes the main themes and insights that emerged from the dialogue.



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The current context of the Treaty

The Treaty has historically worked efficiently to manage the shared waters between Mexico and the United States. However, current environmental conditions, particularly those driven by climate change and prolonged drought, have altered the original circumstances of the two large watersheds it manages (the Colorado River and the Rio Grande/Bravo), for which the Treaty was designed. Even so, the Treaty remains a solid and valuable framework that addresses a range of issues, including sanitation and salinity concerns and has been internationally recognized as a model for binational cooperation. Therefore, while it deserves to be maintained and protected, it must also be updated to remain effective under present and future conditions.

The Treaty would need to be revised to reflect the ongoing impacts of climate change, especially under extreme scenarios, such as prolonged droughts and

more frequent flooding events. These changes, as well, will coincide with increasing water demand (for instance, due to population and industrial growth in the U.S. Southwest) and aging infrastructure.

In addition, the Treaty faces several other challenges beyond the environmental ones. These include gaps in data management, particularly regarding groundwater, as well as political uncertainty that alters management priorities with each new administration, and institutional limitations in addressing multidimensional water challenges. Communication gaps and funding constraints also hinder effective management. Officials from the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) have expressed concerns about limited funding for infrastructure maintenance projects. However, while resources exist, these funds are often redirected due to shifting political priorities.

The year 2025 marks a turning point in shared water management between the two countries, especially in the context of Mexico’s current water debt to the U.S. The current challenges extend beyond the existing framework of the Treaty, necessitating substantial updates. While the situation is complex, it also presents an opportunity for advancement. In looking to resolve this binational water crisis, both countries can develop innovative solutions that advance the future of transboundary water governance.

Recommendations for the path forward

Strengthening Institutional and Political Coordination

Addressing the issues mentioned above will require unprecedented institutional coordination and strong political will, motivated by a genuine desire to prevent the relationship between the two countries from deteriorating. It is essential not to allow the weakening of the institutions that sustain the Treaty, for example, due to a lack of funding. All relevant institutions must be at the table—the Foreign Ministries, water agencies such as CONAGUA, state water commissions, and other relevant stakeholders.

The Need for Joint Action and Communication

A binational problem requires binational solutions. Both countries must improve their communication channels and make these processes more transparent to the public. People have a right to know what is happening. In the past, spaces such as the Border Governors Conferences provided useful forums for discussion and collaboration. While these were not always action-oriented, they created opportunities for decision-makers to meet, share information, and jointly reflect on solutions—something that has been lost in recent years.



Rethinking Funding Mechanisms

Financing remains one of the most persistent challenges. It is crucial to identify innovative investment mechanisms that can attract new investors beyond government sources. The lack of sufficient funds will always be a constraint, so users and governments need to collaborate in designing new financial models. Blended finance and public-private **partnerships could provide alternatives. Innovation is key, as depending solely on a single source of funding is risky, given that priorities often shift with every new administration.**

Empowering Local and Regional Actors

Another significant bottleneck is that cooperation and negotiations between the two countries have so far occurred mostly at the federal level. It is time to empower lower levels of government — states, municipalities, and counties — to play a more active role in governance. For instance, the case of the two Nogales highlights this need: both cities experience severe flooding during the monsoon season every year, yet the required infrastructure remains lacking. Addressing such issues within the framework of the Treaty requires a bottom-up approach that includes local governments and community stakeholders. If all actors—such as concession holders and local users—are not integrated into the process, cooperation will remain fragile. The IBWC–CILA institutions are essential, but their legitimacy and effectiveness could erode if they continue to overlook local-level participation.

Technical Improvements

There is a need to expand the Treaty’s knowledge base and to include more specific action plans and clear mandates. For example, how should “extraordinary drought” be defined in a technical way? Future amendments or Minutes could also be adapted to account for extreme meteorological events driven by climate change.

Additionally, efforts should focus on modernizing the monitoring network, integrating satellite technologies to improve data accuracy, strengthening the technical workforce, and building trust in models among water users. This enables us to replace reactive responses with proactive planning, supported by robust technical groundwork.

Closing

Updating the Treaty should not mean rewriting it from scratch or dismantling it. Instead, it should involve creating new mechanisms that enhance flexibility and ensure its continued relevance in the future.

The event concluded with a shared understanding that the path forward must be guided by flexibility, creativity, collaboration, coordination, transparency, innovative communication models, and political will and commitment.

To watch the recording of the event, visit: binationalwaters.org/event/1944-water-treaty-event