



Rio Grande Valley Buyout Moves Floodplain Residents Out of Harm's Way

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Cameron County, Texas

Cameron County, TX—In the summer of 2008 when Hurricane Dolly swamped the old neighborhood, now largely vacant ground, she unleashed nearly a foot of rain over Antonia Iberra's old home, but nobody was home. In 2006, Antonia and most of her neighbors had moved out as part of a government floodplain acquisition program.



Most of what remains of Del Mar Heights today is only memories, and they are not good ones for Antonia. "It flooded there so much—oh, yes, it flooded every time it rained," she said. "I suffered there for 17 years."

When the government bought her house, Iberra recouped enough money to buy a better house, free and clear, in a safe neighborhood.

"We had built our own house there, from whatever we could find," Iberra said from the shaded porch of her family's pink-framed house. The pleasant neighborhood she lives in now is a far cry from the house in Del Mar Heights. Her husband, Moises, looks after a few black chickens in the backyard, and she cultivates flowers.

"It was all we had—that old house. Every time it rained, we could not get out. I had to put plastic bags on the shoes of the children and walk with them for a long, long way through the mud and the dirty water"—she measured up to her thigh to show the depth—"to try to get the bus to school. I had to carry the little ones. My husband is disabled. An ambulance could not get there when people were sick."

Before the buyout, the residents of Del Mar Heights lived with chronic, contaminated flooding that trapped them in their isolated south Texas neighborhood in rural Cameron County, Texas. The unincorporated 300-acre tract is at the southernmost tip of Texas: 20 miles to the south is the Mexican border; 20 miles east is the edge of the Gulf of Mexico.

The neighborhood was built many years ago without basic services such as water and sewer. The dirt roads stretch across the coastal plain, down toward a drainage canal, south of Highway 100, north of Brownsville.

"The residents are very low income and their houses are substandard," an assessment team reported in 2002. Roads were impassable. Many people had no way to evacuate during a storm.

According to the assessment team's report, elderly people were stranded without food or water. "Children have to walk a long way in the black floodwaters" to be picked up by the school bus, if they could get to school at all. "Due to the poor condition of their homes, their roofs leak and their personal property gets wet, such as their mattresses and clothing. This creates mold...."

In 2003, the neighborhood flooded again because of a weather system that also spawned tornados in nearby coastal areas. This resulted in a Federal declaration, which made Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funding available in the state. The county put together a grant application for a voluntary buyout for Del Mar Heights. It was selected by the state and approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The final project took several years to complete, but it was completed well before Hurricane Dolly washed ashore.

The acquisition project cost approximately \$1.3 million. The joint project of Cameron County, the State of Texas, and FEMA included \$772,720 from FEMA. Nearly 50 families were relocated, the buildings were demolished, and the floodplain land is to be preserved as open space forever.

"We were able to move many people that lived in an unfortunate situation in Del Mar Heights," said Bernadina Garcia, executive assistant to Cameron County Judge Carlos Cascos. "We were able to help them move on with their lives. I know they were relieved to be gone when this storm came through, and I am sure they are saying, 'I'm glad I had the opportunity to get out.'"

A small cluster of homes still remain in the higher portion of Del Mar Heights, and some owners say their home was flooded from Hurricane Dolly. "We still have people calling and asking for us to buy them out," said Garcia. "Hopefully, the county will be able to help more people in the future."

Today's governments face the challenge of trying to correct problems created generations ago. "The Del Mar Heights project is a classic example of the need to erase past floodplain development mistakes," said Gregory Pekar, State Hazard Mitigation Officer from the Texas Governor's Division of Emergency Management. "This subdivision should never have been permitted. But once it was, it was beyond the financial ability of the county to fix the problem. The Federal assistance provided will reduce the demands on local, state and Federal governments far into the future."

Hurricane Dolly affected thousands of homes and businesses in the Rio Grande Valley, and Antonia Iberra's new house was no exception. Wind and rain came in through a damaged roof and water flooded the yard. The power was out for seven days, ruining the precious stash of food.

Antonia's new house is not perfect, but it's better than the one she had in Del Mar Heights. As she puts it, "I better now, my life better."

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region VI**

State: **Texas**

County: **Cameron County**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**

Hazard Type: **Flooding**

Activity/Project Type: **Acquisition/Buyouts**

Activity/Project Start Date: **01/2003**

Activity/Project End Date: **01/2007**

Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**

Funding Recipient: **Local Government**

Funding Recipient Name: **Cameron County**

Application/Project Number: **1439 0009**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$1,300,000.00 (Actual)**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Unknown**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Unknown**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

No URLs were submitted

Main Points

No Main Points were entered.



Sea breezes blow through the Texas coastal plain grasslands, where homes once flooded



Antonia Iberra: Glad for her new pink house