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Texas – New Mexico – Chihuahua Regional Workgroup: EPA Region 6 Water Division Grant

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EPA Region 6 Partnership: San Elizario Independent School District Community Garden Project

San Elizario, Texas

In Fall 2011, EPA Region 6's Water Division's Partnership and Communication Team began a partnership with the San Elizario Independent School District (SEISD) to conduct a community garden pilot project. With \$5,000 in EPA funding and support from the SEISD Board Members, the project launched at an SEISD Adult Learning Center, where approximately 18,750 ft² of unused land was designated for the community garden.

Program coordinators launched a community and school outreach campaign to gain support and volunteers for the project in January 2012. Initially 28 community members pledged their support for developing the garden, which included preparing the soil and building the garden

beds to be used for planting the various crops, herbs or trees.

Due to the interest of the project, it empowered the local community by creating a valuable partnership between the school district, Texas AgriLife, University of Texas at El Paso and various not-for-profit organizations in the community. In fact several classrooms from the local schools, from the primary thru the high school levels, volunteered to participate and assist planting the numerous garden beds for the project. The schools involved included: Lorenzo Loya Primary School, Alfonso Borrego Elementary, LG Alarcon Elementary, Josefa Sambrano Elementary, San Elizario High School and Migrant Education Program. In addition, several members from



various departments within the SEISD (Human Resource Department, District Support Services and teachers) also volunteered their time and efforts. Several private organizations also donated some of the necessary materials needed (i.e. seeds and trees).

A total of 32 beds were constructed, of which 26 of the beds were built from the project funding and 6 additional beds donated by students in the building trade program.



Children from SEISD assisting planting beds.



One of the main challenges the project faced was the water source used to irrigate the garden, which was only one water “faucet” at the front of the building, where a long garden hose had to be run around the center to reach the community garden. Program coordinators sought additional funding from community partners to build a drip irrigation system for the garden. Partners donated approximately \$3,800 for this task and with approval from the SEISD board, the project was completed system in August.



Community members volunteering at garden.

Mr. Ernesto Rodriguez, Executive Director of Research & Development for SEISD and Project Coordinator, received

training from El Paso Master Gardeners, a Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service and shared training information with volunteers. Prior to the project, personnel had no knowledge on how to begin a community garden, what to plant during a particular time of the year, what type of soil techniques are needed for a successful harvest and what maintenance is required to ensure sustainability. Volunteers were able to plant the first seeds and trees for the garden in March. Project volunteers began to see the “fruits” of their labor in May thru October 2012.

Mr. Rodriguez stated, “The garden has taught us many lessons; one in particular is how much the harvest means to our families.” At the end of project approximately 20 poverty-stricken community families were able to receive produce from the garden. They received zucchini, patty pan squash, tomatoes, cilantro, parsley, mescul, basil, lettuce and others. In addition, community members and scho

really took ownership of project, with many already offering their services for the second year harvest. The garden has also served as an example for other nearby school districts who would like to replicate what was done by SEISD. In addition, some of the volunteers are working on beginning their own home garden by taking the knowledge they learned.

Due to EPA’s financial support and the Administration’s priority of expanding the conversation with communities on environmentalism, this project serves as an excellent example of government working to empower a local community by building capacity and providing environmental awareness, while promoting environmental stewardship.



Children planting the garden beds.