

1-15-2010

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NotiSur. "Brazil: Preparing For Post-Copenhagen Economy." (2010). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la_energy_notien/116

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Brazil: Preparing For Post-Copenhagen Economy

After the failure of the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, which was unable to reach a consensus regarding measures needed to fight global warming (see SourceMex, 2009-12-16), Brazil began to prepare for the challenges of a carbon-free economy and other sustainability issues that cannot wait for large international decisions to become a reality. One of the most important pieces will be to implement the Política Nacional de Mudanças Climáticas, in accordance with the climate-change law (Lei de Mudanças Climáticas) signed Dec. 29 by President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. Congress had been debating the bill since 2007. The lawmakers finally approved it and the president signed it just days after the Copenhagen conference ended. However, Lula vetoed several provisions of the bill that reached his desk, indicating, say environmentalists, that Brazil will clearly have difficulty in effectively changing to a post-carbon economy.

Brazil could move away from clean technology Brazil's energy matrix is one of the cleanest in the world. Clean sources provide 89.6% of electricity generation, mostly from water, compared with the world average of 18% from renewable resources. In addition, only 7.8% of Brazil's electricity comes from fossil fuels compared with 67% worldwide, and nuclear energy provides 2.7% of Brazil's electricity compared with 15% worldwide, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA). However, there is a clear "pollution tendency" for Brazil's energy matrix, with the introduction of various gas and coal plants and especially given oil-exploration prospects in the recently discovered subsalt oil reserves on Brazil's ocean shelf. It is this aspect of Lula's vetoes that merit attention. For example, one section of Article 4 that was vetoed calls for "gradually phasing out energy from fossil fuels."

Environmentalists saw this veto as a clear sign of a tendency to consolidate the presence of fossil fuels in the Brazilian energy matrix. The executive's argument, which supported the Ministerio de Minas e Energia (MME) request, was that "the country's present energy policy has prioritized the use of renewable sources of energy in its energy matrix and obtained amply recognized advances in the use of clean technologies. One objective of this policy is the rational use of various available energy resources, which makes an orientation centered on phasing out fossil fuels inadequate." Nevertheless, a few days before Copenhagen, Brazil voluntarily committed to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by between 36% and 39% by 2020, compared to 2005 levels, a goal included in the Política Nacional (see NotiSur, 2009-12-04). And much of that will be achieved, according to the government, through an 80% reduction in deforestation in the Amazon, the largest cause of greenhouse-gas emissions in Brazil. The government has expressed its great satisfaction with the success of its first wind-energy auction, which took place in December during the Copenhagen conference. Proposals for 341 wind-park projects were presented and 71 were approved, which will result in wind-park installations in various northeastern states (Bahia, Ceara, Rio Grande do Norte, and Sergipe as well as Rio Grande do Sul), adding 783 megawatts of energy, enough to meet the energy needs of 3 million people.

But the government also continues to expand its hydroelectric plants and build new nuclear facilities two are now planned for the northeast, which is causing controversy among states in the region (see NotiSur, 2008-11-07). Hydroelectric power, the predominant source in the

Amazon, has caused conflicts and elicited the opposition of environmentalists and the local population because of possible environmental damage from building large dams. Jose Machada, former head of the Agencia Nacional de Aguas (ANA), says, "The energy source that makes the most positive contribution [in combating global warming] is hydroelectric energy, which is a renewable resource that does not generate greenhouse gases, as opposed to coal- and oil-fired plants. Thus we think that the best way to provide energy for Brazil is to take advantage of our hydroelectric potential." Nevertheless, Machado, who left his post at the beginning of 2010 when his term ended, pointed out that "the Amazon's immense water reserves require much more sophisticated planning because of the sensitivity in implementing infrastructure projects in the Amazon. Thus, much care needs to be taken to see that these projects do not endanger the Amazon's environmental sensitivity." Need for public participation While those daunting objectives still have serious questions, society is beginning to mobilize to confront the dilemma of global warming. A major challenge is adapting to the climate change that has already begun and is more and more evident nationally, such as in the torrential rains in late December and early January that claimed many lives.

In Rio de Janeiro state alone, the city of Angra dos Reis (which has two nuclear plants in operation and a third nearing completion, according to government plans), 52 people died in mudslides after the rains. Many of the buildings had been constructed on environmentally inappropriate land. This latest tragedy recalls the dozens of deaths in the state of Santa Catarina in southern Brazil in 2008, when the area was hit by tornadoes, previously unknown in Brazil. The government is strongly defending greater attention to climate-change adaptation and not just to preventing emissions. "I believe that this agenda was sidelined. The environmental agenda focused on countries' commitment to reduce emissions, and the central objective is reducing emissions," said Vicente Andreu Guillo, executive secretary of the Conselho Nacional de Recursos Hidricos e Ambiente Urbano (CNRH) of the Ministerio do Meio Ambiente (MMA). "Adaptation and mitigation actions are essential regarding water; and, in a country with continental dimensions such as Brazil, with the diversity that Brazil and other countries has, at least according to available information, they have not been given the importance they deserve in the polarized debate in the name of emission-control commitments," said Guillo. Guillo proposes a new, broad study on the impact of climate change on precipitation and the consequences for river levels in Brazil, which are essential, for example, for electricity generation, among other contributions to the economy and activity in the country in general. "The country's meteorological network is very solid, time series are very consistent, thus I believe that it is important to continue studies and also do a qualitative and quantitative analysis of this information, to ascertain the effects of change in Brazil's water regime, not only in a very wet period such as 2008-2009, but also in very dry periods such as 2005-2006, when we had a serious drought, especially in the Amazon region," said the secretary.

Various sectors are already doing their part regarding climate-change adaptation. The vulnerability of Brazil's major metropolitan areas (where the majority of the population lives) to the impact of climate change is already being studied, for example, in a joint project of the Nucleo de Estudos da Populacao (NEPO) of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP) and the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (INPE). The first areas of study are Brazil's principal cities, Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which have the most vulnerable bridges, as well as those that would suffer the greatest impact in inundations from more intense rains. The study is

linked to the Rede Clima, created in 2007 under the Ministerio da Ciencia e Tecnologia (MCT). Another UNICAMP study concerns the impact of climate change on the Sao Paulo coast, which is also densely populated. "How should society act regarding climate change?" is one of the themes on the agenda of the World Social Forum (WSF) in late January in Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul. The WSF, which has become a great venue for discussing globalization alternatives, was last held in Porto Alegre in 2005 (when 200,000 people participated) and returns this year, after having been held in other cities. Surely the WSF will keep in mind that Brazil will host another important UN conference on environment and sustainability in 2012, when an assessment will be made of the 20 years since the June 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as Rio-92, in Rio de Janeiro, site of the 2012 event as well.