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CONCERN GROWING ABOUT IMPACT OF ELECTRICAL UTILITIES ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Concern is growing in Mexico about the impact of electrical utilities on the environment, ranging from production and disposal of hazardous wastes to the potential for a leak at Laguna Verde, the country's only nuclear-power plant. Among those raising questions of environmental safety related to power plants is the Montreal-based Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC), an agency created under the auspices of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

In a report published in early July, the CEC said thermoelectric plants in Mexico, the US, and Canada discharged 450,000 tons of contaminants into water, land, and air. The report said power plants are responsible for a large share of air emissions of dangerous substances like nitrogen oxides, mercury, sulfur dioxides, and carbon dioxides.

The CEC report warned the problem is going to worsen because demand for electricity is expected to grow significantly in all three countries during the next seven years. The agency projected increases in the demand for power of 66% in Mexico, 21% in the US, and 14% in Canada between 2002 and 2009.

The report recommended that the NAFTA countries create a special fund to promote the adoption of better technologies to control contamination and to promote increased energy efficiency.

Controversy surrounds power plants in Baja California

The CEC report coincides with a long campaign by environmental organizations to stop the construction of several power plants along the border between Baja California and California. In particular, organizations are concerned about power plants being constructed by California-based Sempra Energy and Massachusetts-based InterGen in Mexicali. The plants, which will supply energy to US states, are being constructed in Mexico to bypass stricter environmental laws in California.

In a report released in mid-April, the environmental organization Greenpeace said the plants are just part of a huge development planned by Sempra, which would change the US- Mexico border region into a vast "dirty energy export zone."

J.P. Ross, author of the report, said nearly 20 big energy companies are planning projects in Baja California and elsewhere along the northern Mexico border to sell natural gas and electricity to US and Mexican consumers. "[These projects] will have terrible impacts all along the border, from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico," Ross said.

Another environmental coalition, the Border Power Plant Working Group, filed a lawsuit in federal court in San Diego in March to stop the projects. The suit contends the US Energy

Department, which granted the permits, did not conduct adequate studies of the impact of the plants on the border region's air and water quality.

"Approving transmission lines for power plants under construction in Mexicali without ensuring that these plants are built to minimize air- and water-quality impacts will cause unnecessary harm to local US and Mexican communities," Bill Powers, a spokesperson for the coalition, told The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Opponents of the plants have gained support from some prominent politicians like US Rep. Bob Filner (D-CA) and Deputy Marti Batres Guadarrama of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) has introduced legislation requiring plant owners to comply with stricter California environmental regulations if they sell energy to residents in that state. "It's valid to ensure that companies that make money in the California energy market also meet with strict environmental standards," said Feinstein.

State utilities criticized for improper disposal of wastes

The problems with waste disposal also extend to the Mexican government's state-run electrical utility companies Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE) and Compania Luz y Fuerza del Centro (CLFC).

In mid-July, the federal environmental-protection agency (Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion del Medio Ambiente, PROFEPA) accused the CLFC and the state-run oil company PEMEX of mishandling and improperly storing 194 tons of polychloride biphenyl (also known as PCB) at the ports of Veracruz, Altamira, and Tampico on the Gulf of Mexico.

PROFEPA director Jose Campillo said the two agencies, with assistance from the private company EcoLab, did not take proper precautions during transportation and storage of the PCBs, thus exposing residents of the three ports and nearby communities to the highly carcinogenic substances. The PCBs have been in storage at the three ports since September 2001, awaiting export to Germany.

The seriousness of the situation caused President Vicente Fox's administration to take action. In mid-July, the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) suspended the export permits for the PCBs and directed EcoLab to conduct the treatment of the substances in Mexico.

But the administration was also called to account by a Senate environmental subcommittee. In testimony before the panel, deputy environment secretary Raul Arriaga Becerra said the case was a symptom of several decades of inadequate policies to handle dangerous industrial wastes like PCBs.

Laguna Verde nuclear power plant remains a concern

The Congress is also continuing to study safety complaints at the Laguna Verde plant. Legislators from the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) in mid-July criticized the Fox administration for failing to ensure safe operations at the nuclear power plant. Critics say the

administration has failed to take any actions despite reports warning of deficiencies at the plants during 2000 and 2001 (see SourceMex, 2000-06-28, 2001-01-12 and 2001-05-09).

PVEM Sen. Veronica Velasco Rodriguez, who chairs the environment committee (Comision del Medio Ambiente), said her committee has requested and not received the results of an audit conducted by a German company at the plant.

Furthermore, Velasco said legislators from the PVEM have received reports that plant personnel have been burning radioactive waste in the open air. "A radioactive cloud can easily reach Mexico City within 24 hours," said Velasco.

Deputy Francisco Patino Cardona of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) criticized authorities for failing to develop an adequate evacuation plan. Patino said the lack of a plan would make it impossible to evacuate the close to 100,000 residents of communities located near the plant.

"It's inconceivable, with the experiences that we've had with Chernobyl and the Vandelos plant in Barcelona...that we do not even have an evacuation plan in Mexico," said Patino, who called for the resignation of the plant directors for failing to implement the Programa de Emergencia Radiologica Externa (PERE).

Patino's complaints gained the attention of the federal and state governments. Less than a week after the legislator's statements to the press, Interior Secretary Santiago Creel and Veracruz Gov. Miguel Aleman Velasco signed an agreement to develop a comprehensive plan to deal with any accident at Laguna Verde, although both officials insisted that an emergency is not imminent because of safety measures implemented at the plant. Among other things, the plan creates six evacuation routes and covers other contingencies.

(Sources: The San Diego Union-Tribune, 03/20/02, 04/15/02, 05/24/02; Reuters, 06/06/02; Agencia de Noticias Proceso, 07/09/02; Novedades, 07/09/02, 07/11/02, 07/17/02; El Financiero, 07/15/02, 07/17/02; Unomasuno, 07/17/02; La Jornada, 07/18/02; El Universal, 07/18/02, 07/20/02)