

4-16-2010

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SourceMex writers. "Border governors conference emphasizes environmental sustainability." (2010).
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BORDER GOVERNORS CONFERENCE EMPHASIZES ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

by Carlos Navarro

For many years, environmental sustainability for the US-Mexico border region was just another issue on the agenda at the Border Governors Conference. But the issue has had a much higher prominence in recent gatherings, thanks in part to the strong advocacy of California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who had made environmental initiatives his top priority since he first participated in the forum five years ago. California's turn to host the Border Governors Conference came in 2008, giving Schwarzenegger the opportunity to make environmental sustainability the central theme of the 26th annual conference, held in Hollywood, California, Aug. 13-15. The conference addressed some of the advances that have been already taken place in reducing pollution along the border as well as the many challenges ahead for the chief executives of the 10 states.

Among the steps the border governors have taken to promote environmental sustainability was creating the Border 2012 program, which seeks ways to improve environmental and health conditions for nearly 12 million residents of the US-Mexico border. The program emphasizes several key areas that affect border communities, including emergency preparedness, air pollution, safe drinking water, the risk of exposure to hazardous waste, and addressing environmental health issues such as farm workers' exposure to pesticides.

Several governors said economic development would not benefit the residents of the border region unless it was accompanied by environmentally sustainable practices. "The border region has the opportunity to set a historic precedent by entering into a contract with nature, where science, the environment and development all work together," said Chihuahua Gov. Jose Reyes Baeza.

Other guest speakers at the conference spoke of the relationship between sound environmental practices and economic growth. "If good environmental policy is identical to good economic policy, then environmental injury is deficit spending," US environmental activist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. said at the opening plenary session.

Governors move to curb scrap tires, other hazardous waste

Hazardous waste is of particular concern to the governors, who have taken steps to stop the dumping of US scrap tires in Mexican communities along the border. The four US governors-- Janet Napolitano of Arizona, Bill Richardson of New Mexico, Rick Perry of Texas, and Schwarzenegger--agreed to seek legislation in their respective states and in the US Congress to place tight restrictions on exports of scrap tires to Mexico. These tires, commonly stored in the open, often leak oily materials, becoming a threat to soil, surface water, and ground water.

The oily material is also highly flammable. "Tire fires result in thick smoke throughout the surrounding area, which can contain pollutants harmful to human health including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), benzene, styrene, phenols, and butadiene. Tire fires also threaten nearby water supplies with harmful contaminants such as lead and arsenic contained in the oily runoff," said the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The tires also present other health hazards, especially when they provide a basin for standing water, which acts as a breeding ground for mosquitoes that carry diseases such as West Nile virus, dengue fever, and malaria.

"Increased cooperation between our states and federal governments is needed, which is why I'm so pleased to announce that we have committed to working together to tackle the

problem of millions of abandoned scrap tires--laying the groundwork to get rid of tire piles for good," Schwarzenegger said.

The California governor said he and his nine colleagues have also begun discussions on long-term strategies to manage water resources during drought conditions.

Six Mexican border states join Western Climate Initiative as observers

In addition to the collaborative work, the 10 governors have also begun to act to improve environmental conditions within their own states, including an effort to reduce greenhouse emissions.

Baeza Terrazas said the six Mexican border states have joined the Western Climate Initiative (WCI) as observers. The governors of Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington launched the WCI in August 2007 to develop regional strategies to address climate change. The governors of Utah and Montana, and the premiers of British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec, and Ontario, have since become partners in the effort. The six Mexican states have the option of eventually joining the initiative as full partners.

"We are working on developing an economy that has an environmental vocation, and that's why our state of Chihuahua, along with Sonora, Tamaulipas, Baja California, Coahuila, and Nuevo Leon, decided to join the Western Climate Initiative as observers," said Baeza.

The Chihuahua governor said the association with the WCI allows the six states to access public and private funding for projects designed to reduce greenhouse gases within their borders.

"The era of energy derived from fossil fuels is coming to a close," said Baja California Gov. Jose Guadalupe Osuna Millan, who noted that his state has already started to transition to cleaner forms of energy such as natural gas, which it is using to generate electricity for state residents and for export to California. "Above all, we are launching initiatives to generate energy from renewable sources, such as wind power and solar cells," added the governor, who said he has proposed that the 10 border states assume a leadership role in promoting alternative energy. Osuna Millan also pointed to plans by German company Q-Cells to establish a solar-cell manufacturing plant in Mexicali (see [SourceMex, 2008-06-11](#)).

Mexico's Secretaria del Medio Ambiente and Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) has also proposed creating a campaign for all 31 Mexican states and the Federal District to eventually coordinate efforts to address global climate change.

Environment Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada, a guest speaker of the conference, cited an agreement that the Mexican federal government has signed with California, which could initially be implemented in the six Mexican border states. He said the agreement includes an inventory of greenhouse-gas emissions at the local, state, and regional levels and adopting California's low-carbon air-quality standard.

Elvira has also proposed establishing 15 cross-border pollution-control districts. Some communities have already formed pollution-monitoring initiatives, including the area comprising Dona Ana County, New Mexico, El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez.

The environment secretary has also offered proposals to help increase water supplies in the border region, such as constructing desalination plants in coastal areas to ensure drinking water supplies for western Mexico and California and Arizona. "You see, these are important breakthroughs, and they build on our history of friendship and accomplishment," Elvira told the El Paso Times.

Conference emphasizes public-private partnerships

As part of the conference, the governors put a high emphasis on public-private partnerships,

which could help finance many capital-intensive projects and provide access to the latest technology required to make the region environmentally sustainable.

"Through our efforts, the different levels of government, along with private industry, can take the necessary actions to enable the economic transformation of the region," said Tamaulipas Gov. Eugenio Hernandez Flores.

To underscore the importance of the public-private partnership, Schwarzenegger organized the Green Technology Exposition, where nearly 70 companies from both sides of the border displayed "green" products and resources, including electric cars, solar-powered flashlights, and nontoxic cleaning products.

Schwarzenegger expressed confidence that environmental sustainability would remain a major focus of the 10 border governors. "Now, our work is complicated, it's never ending, and it requires constant coordination and collaboration," said the California governor. "But this organization [the border governors coalition] has shown time and time again that it is ready to rise to any challenge."

This article was supplemented with information from the following sources: <http://www.epa.gov/garbage/tires>; Environment News Service, Hoy Tamaulipas, 08/14/08; El Paso Times, 08/15/08