

4-11-2003

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Recommended Citation

Hynds, Patricia. "Brazil: Toxic Waste Spill A Disaster For Rivers." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13136>

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Brazil: Toxic Waste Spill A Disaster For Rivers

by Patricia Hynds

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, April 11, 2003

Brazilian environmental officials are battling the spread of toxins from a reservoir at a pulp and paper factory in southeastern Minas Gerais state in what environmental groups said could become the country's worst industrial accident. Ecologists said the ecosystem could take 15 years to recover, without even considering the as-yet-unknown health effects. The spill from the Brazilian company Industrias Cataguazes de Papel could damage 300 beaches in Rio de Janeiro and Espiritu Santo. It has left long stretches of two rivers contaminated and void of life. Monetary and other damages from the spill have not yet been calculated. Potable water was cut off to 600,000 people in the eastcentral region of Minas Gerais state and the northern section of Rio de Janeiro state, and fishing and farm irrigation were prohibited. The most obvious evidence of the disaster was the blackened water, which had a repulsive odor and was covered with foam and dead fish. Biologists and environmental technicians say that decontaminating the rivers could take 10 to 15 years, since the toxic substances have impregnated the riverbed and decompose very slowly. The problem began March 29 when a sedimentation tank used to store chemical waste ruptured at the Cataguazes pulp and paper company in the town of Cataguazes in Minas Gerais state. More than 3 billion liters of toxic waste including sulphur, active chloride, and sodium sulphate emptied into the Paraiba do Sul river, one of the country's major waterways, and spread into the Pomba river before the leak was shut off two days later. The Rio de Janeiro state government ordered eight artesian wells drilled and sent trucks to supply drinking water to seven cities and towns affected by the spill. The waste was moving toward the Atlantic Ocean at a rate of about 30 meters a minute, state officials said. By April 2 it had reached Campos, a coastal city of 300,000 about 65 km from the sea. The health of three million people is threatened, says the environmental group Movimento Grito das Aguas. On April 7, officials said they feared that heavy rains could prompt another spill. "There is another reservoir at the same plant that represents spillage risks, and experts are flying over the area to assess ways to prevent further damage," said an official with Rio de Janeiro environmental body Fundacao Estadual de Engenharia do Meio Ambiente (Feema). The second reservoir contains about 700 million liters of toxic waste from the pulp bleaching process, mainly caustic soda. Officials trying to minimize problem The rise in the pH of the river has killed hundreds of plants, animals, and fish. Local officials warned area not to drink or bathe in water from the rivers. The water supply and irrigation channels were shut down in Campos. Caustic soda, or sodium hydroxide, is used in paper mills at concentrations of 50% or higher, said Mary DeVany, president of DeVany Industrial Consultants in Vancouver, Washington. "At 50% concentration, it has a pH of 14. A 10% solution will eat the skin right off your body." Water that can be isolated or contained can be treated with dilute hydrochloric or acetic acid. Officials worked with the state oil company Petrobras to capture the foam from the spill, but they said there was little they could do to hold back the liquid waste. The National Water Agency ordered two dams in Minas Gerais state to release water to dilute the residue and push it more quickly toward the sea. Extensive damage to fishing villages The people in the affected area who have earned their living from fishing are wondering how they will survive. The fishing town of Sao Fidelis in Rio de Janeiro has been restocking the river with fish and freshwater lobsters since 1995, "and now all of that is lost," said Goncalves, a leader of the fishing community. Before the disaster, he said, each person could catch up to four kg of lobster per

day. Sao Fidelis, one of nearly 50 cities and towns affected by the spill, used to be known as "the land of the freshwater lobster, but now it's the land of destruction." The people in Sao Fidelis were luckier than some. They began to store water as soon as they heard about the accident and before the contaminated water reached them. But other municipalities upriver did not have time to take such measures. Santo Antonio de Padua, for example, had been without water for four days and its 35,000 residents were "living in chaos," mayor Luiz Fernando Padilha told Inter Press Service in a telephone interview on April 2. He said about 300 people in the town had lost their source of income, which will be gone for years to come, and the fish-farming projects developed over the past 12 years have been destroyed. Schools closed, leaving 15,000 students without classes, and many sectors of the economy shut down. "But right now, we have to find enough water for everyone's survival," said the mayor. Plant owners indicted Brazil's environmental authorities suspended operations at the Cataguazes plant and fined the company US\$15 million. It is not the company's first offense. There were protests in many area cities in the 1990s because the company dumped its waste directly into the river. That was when the storage tanks were built. On April 4, Federal Judge Marcelo Araujo of Campos ordered the arrest of the owners of the factory. The judge said that the Federal Police tried to arrest owners Felix Santana and Joao Gregorio do Bem on April 3 in Cataguazes, but they had fled. "They are accused of crimes such as environmental damage, cutting off distribution of water, and impeding people's access to the beaches," said Judge Araujo. If convicted, they could be sentenced to five years in prison. Police later found Santana, a Spaniard who became a naturalized Brazilian, and took him to Campos where he was questioned and charged, but Gregorio is still a fugitive. The pulp and paper industry and the petroleum industry have been responsible for numerous environmental disasters affecting Brazil's rivers and coastline in the past few years. As authorities scrambled to contain this latest spill, conservation groups criticized the government for having weak monitoring systems in place. The spill suggests that the authorities are unprepared for and unable to deal with accidents, said a spokesperson for the Brazilian branch of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF). Alerts and regular water-quality monitoring, which could have detected the spill earlier, were absent. "It is the worst accident we have on record," said WWF Brazil Water For Life program coordinator Samuel Barreto. "We have had big oil spills, but they don't bring as much damage. This one really alters the ecology and economy in the region," said a spokesman for the government's environmental agency Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renovaveis (IBAMA). [Sources: Associated Press, Inter Press Service, 04/02/03; Reuters, 04/04/02; Nature News Service, 04/04/03; The Boston Globe, Notimex, 04/05/03; planetark.org, 04/07/03; uai.com.br, 04/09/03]

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