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Commentary

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CLIFF METZNER*

Commentary

Water scarcity in the southwest United States/northern Mexico border region will be the major environmental problem relating to future border development and the success of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The United States/Mexico Border Environmental Agreement, signed by the presidents of the two countries in 1983, is the hallmark of serious cooperative efforts to improve environmental quality on both sides of the border. The free trade agreement, if approved, will generate increased economic activity in the border region, with accompanying drastic environmental impacts. In order to adequately deal with these problems, the two countries must work together to avoid and ameliorate environmental impacts growing out of the free trade agreement.

Crucial environmental issues, in addition to water shortages, facing both countries include: pollution of the Tijuana and New rivers which flow from Mexico into San Diego and Imperial Valley areas of California; air pollution in the El Paso and Ciudad Juarez area; pollution of the Rio Grande River, transboundary aquifers between the states of Texas and Chihuahua from industrial hazardous wastes generated by the foreign owned maquiladora industry and domestic firms in Mexican border cities.

There seems to be no lack of commitment by both countries, but there is a severe lack of funds. With the enhancement of free trade and commerce between the United States and Mexico, additional state, federal, and private funds could be made available for the environmental needs which, in turn, will strengthen trade relations by establishing systems for appropriate hazardous waste disposal, reducing air pollution between sister cities, improving water quality, and the reclamation of wastewater to be used for agricultural irrigation and industry.

The expansion of bilateral trade will increase border demographic problems by bringing more people and industry and inducing an increased strain on the environment. If sufficient funds are lacking for needed environmental projects to alleviate these problems, severe environmental impacts will result, affecting population, health, economy, and commerce. Of course, the other major problem that will arise is the provision of adequate water supplies. The Colorado River, which supplies the

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Imperial and Mexicali valleys in addition to the southern California and northern Baja regions, is fully allotted. Transboundary aquifers are drying up and the use of the Rio Grande is at capacity. There is no additional water available—conservation, reclamation, and future changes in water distribution are the only practical answers. Without water there is no possibility of growth in the border. If we are to create a safe border environment that will accommodate the necessary growth for successful free trade, both countries must commit the manpower and funds over a long period and plan actions together. This could be accomplished through the Border Environmental Agreement, as well as the creation of an International Border Environmental Planning and Management Board, which would provide the administrative management of the Agreement with the power, funds, and facilities to get things done.

The growth that will emerge from the NAFTA must be planned with the installation of environmental projects to reduce pollution, and to prevent negative environmental impacts.

The Border Environmental Agreement, under Article 21, can be amended at the agreement of both parties. After 10 years of operation and many successful accomplishments, it is time to amend and strengthen the Agreement to deal with the new and broader environmental challenges that will face both the United States and Mexico as they begin these new initiatives.

To adequately deal with these new challenges, a Joint Environmental Planning and Management Board should be established with technical experts, as well as federal and state authorities from both countries, as members. The Border Environmental Agreement should be amended to eliminate the joint working groups and the coordinator. The responsibilities of the coordinators can be taken over by the Joint Management Board and permanent working groups can be established by the technical experts on the Planning Board. This method will allow the Joint Planning and Management Board to carry out long-range planning from a policy standpoint, as well as make the technical decisions necessary to solve the environmental problems that arise along the border. Outside experts, particularly academics, can be consulted when appropriate in solving particular environmental problems. The United States Department of State and the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs would have the leadership role in the Joint Management Board and would be responsible for calling on the appropriate technical agencies for Board members as well as asking state and local authorities to serve as advisers to the Board. The IBWC (already an operating part of the foreign ministries of both countries) would be an integral part of the Border Environmental Agreement and would have authority for all water quality, distribution, and pollution issues.