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Long-Term Plan Would Address Chronic Air Pollution Problems in Mexico City

by LADB Staff

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On Feb. 1, the Environment, Natural Resources, and Fisheries Secretariat (Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca, SEMARNAP) unveiled a strategic plan that proposes long-term solutions to the chronic problems of air pollution in Mexico City. The new plan dubbed the Alianza Metropolitana para la Recuperacion de un Aire Limpio sets as a goal to bring cleaner air to Mexico City by the year 2000. In a press conference attended by key municipal, state, and federal officials, SEMARNAP head Julia Carabias unveiled a comprehensive plan offering 70 separate actions to address the chronic problem of air pollution in Mexico City.

Full details of the plan will be presented in a report scheduled for release in February. SEMARNAP's new long-term environmental plan was announced less than two weeks after authorities in Mexico City were forced to implement emergency actions for a 72-hour period because of dangerous levels of air pollution. During that period, the pollution index (Indice Metropolitano de Calidad del Aire, IMECA) measured ozone levels in the capital as high as 269 points, nearly three times more than the "safe" ozone level of 100 points designated by the World Health Organization (WHO). While air pollution is a year-round problem in Mexico City, the situation becomes more severe in the winter months (December-February) because of thermal inversions in the atmosphere.

Under the emergency plan, Mexico City's environmental control commission (Comision Metropolitana para la Prevencion y Control de la Contaminacion Ambiental) enacted tight restrictions on the circulation of automobiles, reduced sales of gasoline, and established requirements that factories reduce their emissions by 30% to 40%. Because of these measures, authorities succeeded in bringing the ozone measurement on the IMECA down to about 160 points, which has been the annual average for Mexico City over the course of 1995. However, this level is still far higher than the WHO's 100-point "safe" ozone level. The high levels of ozone and other dangerous substances such as sulfur and lead in the air in Mexico City have raised strong concerns about effects on the health of a large segment of the population, especially the elderly and young children. According to health authorities, the dangerous level of contaminants in the air results in breathing complications and other effects, such as nausea, eye irritations, and severe headaches.

According to Carabias, the long-term plan introduced by SEMARNAP intends to bring down ozone levels in Mexico City to about 140 points on the IMECA index by the year 2000. She told reporters that the SEMARNAP plan offers economic incentives for manufacturers to incorporate the latest anti-pollution technology in factories and automobiles. A major element of the plan will be to strengthen inspection and monitoring capacities to ensure that anti-pollution regulations are followed strictly. The plan will also include intensive education for the citizens of Mexico City regarding steps that can be taken to reduce air pollution. Additionally, Carabias said the government will phase in the use of cleaner fuels for all motor vehicles, and adopt strict guidelines

to remove all pollution-causing vehicles from circulation. Under this plan, the government would phase out the current "Hoy No Circula" program which requires residents to leave their cars at home for one day a week. This program, which has been in place since 1990, set as a goal to take out of circulation 600,000 cars per day out of the 3 million automobiles circulating in Mexico City.

The "Hoy No Circula" has met with only limited success in regulating the number of cars on the road. For example, because of the program, many Mexico City residents have acquired a second or third automobile to drive on days when they cannot drive their primary vehicle. Often, the second or third automobile is an older, highly polluting model. Carabias said the Hoy No Circula program would be phased out rather than eliminated at once. She said residents would be given economic incentives to trade off their older vehicles for newer models.

In place of the Hoy No Circula program, SEMARNAP proposed another program of strict emission-control requirements. Under this program, any vehicle that does not meet these strict controls would be taken out of circulation entirely. The new vehicle-inspection regulations would replace the emissions-testing program that has been in place since 1993. This program requires all vehicles to pass inspection twice a year. However, according to some environmental groups, the program also provides loopholes for inspectors to bypass regulations (see SourceMex, 02/03/93).

According to government estimates, most cars and trucks that are 15 years or older would probably not be able to meet the tougher standards. This means that almost 1.6 million vehicles, or 45% of the total 3.5 million cars and trucks that normally circulate in Mexico City, would have to be taken out of circulation. "The older vehicles generate 50 times more toxic substances than an automobile that is clean and in good mechanical condition," said Mexico City environmental official Adrian Fernandez. Indeed, authorities blame automobile emissions for 85% of the air pollution in Mexico City.

As part of the program to reduce harmful emissions from automobiles, the Zedillo administration has also begun a series of consultations with motor vehicle manufacturers. According to officials from the government's national environmental institute (Instituto Nacional Ecologista, INE), the primary goal of the consultations is to ensure that new vehicles assembled by automobile and truck manufacturers in Mexico meet the stricter anti-pollution requirements for Mexico City.

Still, despite the massive changes proposed by SEMARNAP, the secretariat's new long-term plan is expected to be met with strong skepticism, since enforcement may become a major headache for the government. INE statistics indicate that air pollution standards are violated in Mexico City during 88% of the year. Indeed, statistics from the Public Safety Secretariat (Secretaria de Seguridad Publica) suggest that despite increased scrutiny and tighter restrictions, the stricter rules may be hard to enforce. During the three-day pollution emergency in January, for example, authorities were forced to impound more than 1,000 vehicles in Mexico City for violating the restrictions on circulation. In addition to the problems with enforcement, critics say the SEMARNAP program will be viewed with strong skepticism among the population because of the failure of programs in the past. Air pollution in the capital has been a major problem for about 50 years, during which time many efforts to clean the air have proved completely ineffective.

Among others is a program that was started in 1990 by Mexico City's environmental commission. The program which operates through a partnership between the commission and the federal government has attempted to impose 32 different measures to significantly reduce pollution in the capital. Nevertheless, critics charge that over the past five years, the effort has only resulted in marginal improvements in the quality of air in Mexico City. In some cases, a lack of action by the commission has resulted in worsening already existing air pollution problems. In a recent, confidential report which was made public in late January by the weekly news magazine *Proceso* the commission cited as successes in the program the expansion of the public transportation system and stricter monitoring and conversion programs for factories in the capital.

At the same time, however, the commission admitted that the problems of air pollution in Mexico City remain overwhelming. "There are no magic formulas, nor instant solutions to address the problems in Mexico City," read the report. According to *Proceso*, the commission has been very slow in using the monetary resources at its disposal, which include funds from multilateral and foreign institutions. Roughly one-fourth of the US\$4.1 million allocated for the program came from the World Bank, the Inter-American development Bank, and the US Export-Import Bank.

The *Proceso* report said federal and municipal authorities have used funds for such purposes as development of unleaded gasoline and other environmentally sound fuels, improvement to the capital's transportation system, reforestation, and the closure of PEMEX's Azcapotzalco Refinery. However, the report said the government has neglected such efforts as education and training, reforestation outside of the city limits, and health monitoring. Indeed, federal authorities admit that pollution-monitoring efforts have failed to reveal the true extent of health problems for the city's population.

According to a report published by INE, the IMECA which is used primarily to monitor ozone levels is inadequate to detect other substances that could create potential health problems for the population. For example, the INE said Mexico lacks the capacity to conduct studies related to toxicology, epidemiology, and the level of exposure to chemicals and other pollutants that could lead to tighter air quality standards. Environmentalists, business organizations, and civic leaders also blame the severe contamination of the air in the capital partially on the failure of the state-run oil company PEMEX to develop cleaner fuels. In late January, a government-business coalition issued a strongly worded statement criticizing PEMEX and its research branch Instituto Mexicano del Petroleo for "supposed advancements" in production of environmentally sound fuels.

The coalition included representatives from the employers confederation (Confederacion Patronal de Mexico, COPARMEX), the national council of environmentally conscious industrialists (Consejo Nacional de Industriales Ecologistas), and Mexico's representative to the environmental commission of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In recent years, PEMEX has successfully introduced unleaded fuels such as Magna Sin and Diesel Sin, but the critics said this is only a small step in the full effort that is needed to address the problem. According to a study published by the economic analysis department of the daily newspaper *El Financiero*, PEMEX would have to invest US\$1 billion to adapt its refineries to produce the type of gasoline needed to clean up the environment in Mexico City.

Officials for the US oil company Atlantic Richfield (ARCO) suggest such gasoline would typically reduce levels of benzene by 50% and sulfur by 80%. The three-day pollution emergency in Mexico City during January also attracted the attention of the Mexican Congress. In late January, the Permanent Commission of the Chamber of Deputies announced plans to hold hearings to analyze the capital's environmental problems and attempt to develop a comprehensive, long-term solution. The commission invited representatives of citizens organization, the transportation sector, business leaders, and others to testify at a hearing, which is scheduled for February. (Sources: Agence France-Press, 01/20/96, 01/21/96, 01/22/96; Excelsior, 01/24/96; El Financiero, 01/25/96; La Jornada, 01/25/96, 01/26/96; Reforma, 01/26/96; Proceso, 01/22/96, 01/29/96; El Financiero International, 01/29/96; Agence France-Press, 02/01/96; Excelsior, 02/01/96, 02/02/96)

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