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Pemex Environmental Record Called into Question

by LADB Staff

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In late March, the international environmental organization Greenpeace accused Mexico's state-run oil company PEMEX of creating significant contamination problems in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. According to the Greenpeace report, PEMEX has engaged in a number of negligent actions, including a failure to repair leaks in drilling platforms that have been out of use for as long as 20 years. The report was compiled as part of an effort by Greenpeace to document contamination problems caused by PEMEX's oil-drilling practices on the coasts of Tabasco and Campeche states. The violations were documented by Greenpeace's vessel, the Rainbow Warrior. The report said one of the greatest sources of contamination in the coastal areas near Mexico is oil spills originating at drilling platforms no longer used by PEMEX.

"This practice represents a serious threat, since most of the PEMEX oil drilling is conducted offshore," said the Greenpeace report. Greenpeace blames pollution on abandoned drilling platforms. According to Greenpeace, PEMEX is violating international treaties signed in 1958, which require the total removal of any drilling platforms that are no longer in use. If the platforms are not removed immediately, the owners must at least conduct the necessary repairs to prevent leakage. According to the environmental organization, contamination from the wells could eventually destroy the fishing industry in Tabasco, Campeche, and Veracruz states, while creating serious hazards for navigation in the Gulf of Mexico.

In addition, the report accused PEMEX of consistently dumping wastes into the ocean, including rusted metals, plastics, wood, and obsolete equipment. Alejandro Calvillo, a program coordinator with Greenpeace-Mexico, told reporters that PEMEX has spent millions of pesos on publicity to improve its image as an environmentally responsible organization. "This money could be used for activities that actually protect the environment," said Calvillo. Opposition party threatens blockade of drilling wells

The Greenpeace complaints about PEMEX's dismal environmental record followed similar complaints by legislators from the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) earlier in the month. The PRD legislators, led by Sen. Auldarico Hernandez Geronimo of Tabasco, have threatened to blockade drilling platforms in the state during US President Bill Clinton's visit to Mexico in April or May. Clinton was scheduled to visit Mexico in mid-April, but White House spokespersons have said the visit may be postponed until May to allow the US president to recover from a knee injury.

Speaking to reporters, Sen. Hernandez accompanied by fellow PRD Sens. Hector Sanchez of Oaxaca, Felix Salgado of Guerrero, and Ernesto Navarro of Nayarit reiterated the PRD's demand that PEMEX restore coastal areas, lagoons, and 100,000 hectares of land it has "devastated" in Tabasco. Sen. Sanchez took the opportunity to urge President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to force PEMEX to provide economic compensation to 63,000 Tabasco residents who were displaced

or left with infertile land because of Pemex's lucrative operations, valued at US\$21 billion a year. "If the government offers no clear proposals to improve Tabasco's environment in the coming days, more than 20,000 citizens of Tabasco will be waiting to express their disappointment to the US government when President Clinton visits," said Sen. Hernandez. "There could be peaceful protests to close oil rigs or paralyze all petroleum activity in the southeast."

In early 1996, PRD-led protesters blockaded 64 Pemex facilities in Tabasco to demand better living conditions and environmental protections. "It's incredible that the southeast of the Republic is one of the richest regions in natural resources petroleum, electricity, water, and forests yet contains the nation's poorest states," said Sen. Sanchez. Pedro Alvarez de Icaza, a director with the government-affiliated national environmental institute (INE), acknowledged that PEMEX has created severe environmental damage in the states of Tabasco, Campeche, and Chiapas. The INE is a division of the Environment, Natural Resources, and Fisheries Secretariat (SEMARNAP).

At the same time, Alvarez said the executive branch has historically had difficulty forcing PEMEX to comply with environmental regulations because the agency has significant autonomy in its own decisions. Alvarez said PEMEX has a long way to go to correct the environmental damage created over the past several decades. On the other hand, he suggested that executives have begun to place greater emphasis on environmental protection, in part because of pressure from residents in the affected areas. "If PEMEX fails to act on the growing number of complaints, this could affect its public image, not only in our country, but at the international level," said Alvarez. (Sources: The News, 03/07/97; El Universal, 03/07/97, 04/01/97; Novedades, 04/01/97)

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