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Zedillo Government Increases Budget for Environmental Protection

by LADB Staff

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In early April, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration which is facing increasing pressure to address the country's severe pollution problems announced a new initiative to promote environmental protection. As part of the initiative, Zedillo committed 9.7 billion pesos (US\$1.2 billion) for the Environment, Natural Resources, and Fisheries Secretariat (SEMARNAP) for fiscal year 1997- 1998, an increase of 6% in real terms from the previous year. According to SEMARNAP Secretary Julia Carabias, the administration's plan includes a nationwide reforestation program, the construction of hazardous waste and sewage treatment centers, and the creation of several nature reserves.

In addition, Carabias said the government has launched air-quality improvement programs in Guadalajara and Monterrey, as well as a program already under way in Mexico City. Carabias said the reforestation program has set a goal of planting 340 million trees around the country in 1997. In addition, she said SEMARNAP is hoping to designate 28 wilderness locations around the country as nature preserves in the near future.

The hazardous-waste treatment and disposal facilities, according to Carabias, will be constructed in the states of Coahuila, Guanajuato, Puebla, and Mexico in the coming year. As part of this initiative, the government will also create new centers to treat hospital waste.

Carabias said the goal of the Zedillo administration is to construct enough sewage-treatment facilities in Mexico by the end of the century to handle 70% of all sewage. According to some estimates, 84% of all sewage and waste water produced in Mexico is currently discharged into rivers, lakes, and oceans. The environment secretary said Mexico has doubled its treatment rate for hazardous waste in the past two years. On the other hand, she also acknowledged that more than 90% of the 8 million metric tons of hazardous waste produced in Mexico annually does not receive proper disposal or treatment.

Plan offers anti-pollution initiatives for Mexico City

The administration's environmental plan also contains a new initiative to address the growing pollution problems in and around Mexico City, at a cost of 700 million pesos (US\$88.9 million). This portion of the plan is funded in large part by the World Bank and Japan's Export-Import Bank. The initiative includes several programs dealing with reforestation, soil conservation, and replenishment of groundwater supplies.

Speaking to reporters after announcing the environmental initiatives, President Zedillo said the new plan represents a continuation of efforts by his administration to fight various types of pollution. "Yes, we have evidence of grave ecological damages in our country...but there is also evidence that we are advancing in many areas," the president said. Indeed, Zedillo can claim credit for

concentrating environmental protection in a single secretariat. Before SEMARNAP was created out of the old fisheries secretariat, environmental-protection efforts were concentrated in the social development secretariat (SEDESOL). Carabias said one of the principal functions of SEMARNAP is to harmonize anti-poverty programs with environmental protection through a special sustainable-development program (Programa de Desarrollo Regional Sustentable, PRODERS). Carabias said PRODERS would place special emphasis on regions of the country where the rate of poverty is highest.

On the other hand, Carabias cautioned that the resolution to Mexico's environmental problems will have to come in the medium to long term, since the administration is having to fight decades of neglect. The administration's commitment to fight pollution and promote sustainable development was generally well received in the environmental community, although there was some criticism that the funds allocated for anti-pollution programs were insufficient to address Mexico's massive contamination problems.

Environmentalists oppose state forest-development plan

Some groups also took the opportunity to criticize the administration's effort to push through changes in forest-related legislation without broader consultation. A key element of the administration's plan would promote the development of forest plantations while establishing environmental guidelines for such developments.

The strongest protests were lodged by a coalition formed by four organizations El Pacto del Grupo de Ecologistas, Pronatura Chiapas, Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, and Centro en Ecología y Salud para Campesinos. The four environmental groups expressed concern that the forest legislation fails to include safeguards to protect the rights of indigenous communities to preserve their natural resources. The environmental groups, with support from federal legislators affiliated with the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), asked the Chamber of Deputies to introduce a motion to suspend consideration of forest legislation until an amended version is introduced.

"As long as there is no legal statute to protect the rights of indigenous communities as true owners of the resources in the forest, we cannot introduce any legislation to impose economic regulation on such property," said PRD Deputy Victor Sosa Cedillo.

Responding to the criticisms about a lack of consultations, Carabias said SEMARNAP, the Trade Secretariat (SECOFI), and various committees in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate hosted a total of 160 meetings with nongovernmental organizations to address the subject over an eleven-month period. She said the administration was seeking the broadest consensus before proposing changes to forest legislation in the Mexican Congress. Defending the administration's push for quick approval of the forest legislation, Carabias raised the need for the Mexican government to establish environmental guidelines regulating the expansion of forest plantations. "At this moment, many developers of forest plantations are operating without any regulatory framework and without environmental guidelines to follow," said Carabias.

The legislation, which was approved in mid-April by the committee on forests and jungles (Comision de Bosques y Selvas) in the Chamber of Deputies, is expected to be passed by the

full legislative body sometime before May. According to some estimates, area devoted to forest plantations is expected to expand to 50,000 hectares by year- end 1997, compared with the current level of 17,000 ha.

Carabias said the government needs a legal framework to regulate this expansion. "If legislation is not approved in this session of Congress, then we may not have another opportunity until next year," said Carabias. In addition to imposing regulations on the development of forest plantations, the proposed legislation offers SEMARNAP wide latitude in developing environmental-restoration programs in Mexico's forest regions.

Meanwhile, members of the private sector said the legislation would remove uncertainty for domestic and foreign investors and promote a framework for companies to use trees while at the same time protecting the environment. According to estimates provided by the Asociacion Nacional de Plantadores Forestales (ANAPLAN) and the Camara Nacional de las Industrias de la Celulosa y del Papel (CNIP), the industry is facing growing demand for wood pulp. Officers of the two organizations suggested that a lack of legislation could inhibit new investment of as much as US\$1 million in the Mexican forestry sector in 1997.

PRD Deputy Carlota Botey, who chairs the agrarian-reform committee in the Chamber of Deputies, suggested that the legislation is designed primarily to favor international paper companies, which are seeking to "legally exploit" Mexico's natural resources. The concerns of Botey and other PRD members are justified, since one of the major developers is the US company Temple Inlad. According to the daily business newspaper El Economista, Temple Inlad has spent about US\$3 million to develop about 9,000 ha of forest land. Another large developer is Grupo Pulsar, which has formed a partnership with US-based International Paper (see SourceMex, 03/12/97).

El Economista said companies from Ireland and Finland have already developed partnerships with Mexican companies, which are planning, in turn, to launch forest plantations if the legislation is approved. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on April 23, reported at 7.87 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: The News, 04/01/97, 04/02/97; El Nacional, 04/07/97; Novedades, 04/01/97, 04/02/97, 04/17/97; Excelsior, 04/01/97, 04/02/97, 04/17/97, 04/18/97; El Economista, 04/01/97, 04/02/97, 04/22/97; El Universal, 04/01/97, 04/22/97; La Jornada, 04/02/97, 04/17/97, 04/18/97, 04/22/97)

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