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Arbitrary Disposal of Hazardous Material Causes Major Problems in Mexico

by LADB Staff

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According to a report published by the Instituto Nacional de Ecologia (INE), random disposal of toxic waste has created serious contamination problems for 38 metropolitan areas and 27 states in Mexico. The report from the INE a division of the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) said Mexican industry produces about 8 million metric tons per year of hazardous material, including toxic, flammable, and corrosive materials and biological wastes.

Almost 80% of waste disposed at random sites

Of this total, only about 1.8 million MT is treated according to approved environmental specifications. The other 6.2 million MT, or almost 80% of the total, is deposited at clandestine sites or sent to municipal trash dumps. Furthermore, the problem may be worse, since the INE acknowledged that its statistics are based on cases that have actually been reported to the government. "There is an important volume of residue that is not reported," INE said.

According to the report, the larger quantities of hazardous waste are produced by companies involved in mining, production of petrochemical and basic chemicals, and oil refining. In many cases, the local topographical conditions such as the presence of volcanic soil aggravated the problem. "In all cases, these hazardous materials endanger nearby residents," the INE report said. "They create health-related problems, such as damage to the nervous and respiratory systems, deformities, and cancer."

According to INE, the problems are most severe in the central states of Guanajuato and Aguascalientes, where toxic wastes are frequently found in the municipal trash dumps. The problem is particularly bad near the cities of Celaya, Irapuato, Salamanca, Leon, Silao, and Aguascalientes. Severe problems were also present near industrial areas in the central states of Morelos, Jalisco, Puebla, Queretaro, Mexico, and the Mexico City metropolitan area.

In the north, hazardous waste disposal is threatening populations in industrial cities in Coahuila, Sonora, Baja California, Nuevo Leon, Durango, Tamaulipas, and Chihuahua states. In Nuevo Laredo, Piedras Negras, Nogales, and Mexicali, problems were attributed directly to the maquiladora industry. And, problems are also significant in areas where the state-run oil company PEMEX operates refineries and other production facilities, including the southern states of Veracruz, Chiapas, and Tabasco.

Government lacks funds to build confinement sites

In a report published in early August, the daily newspaper Excelsior said the Mexican government is facing a one-year deadline to raise US\$480 million to construct 12 confinement facilities for toxic

waste and hazardous material to meet requirements spelled out by Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD). Mexico, which joined the OECD in 1994, pledged to meet certain environmental requirements, including the construction of proper waste-confinement facilities, before year-end 1998. Under a plan developed by the INE to meet these requirements, the government launched a special program in October 1996 to raise private capital to construct the 12 initial sites in six states.

The long-term goals of the plan are to build 55 waste-confinement facilities throughout Mexico. INE director Gabriel Quadri de la Torre said the lack of facilities has forced Mexico to ship 80,000 MT of industrial waste for treatment in countries such as the US, France, Finland, Britain, and the Netherlands. Much of this waste is produced by government entities PEMEX and the Comision Federal de Electricidad, as well as several private companies. Quadri acknowledged that private investors have been reluctant to commit to the INE program because of flaws in the original plan, which, among other things, proposed to construct the confinement sites within the boundaries of national parks and nature preserves.

Environment Secretary Julia Carabias said many local communities have resisted the construction of waste- confinement sites, which has further hampered efforts to meet the OECD requirements. According to Carabias, many of these communities are concerned that the confinements will be used to dump hazardous waste produced in the US and other countries. "Mexico will not become a dumping ground for toxic wastes from the US," Carabias pledged to members of the Chamber of Deputies during a session in mid-August.

Waste imports from US contribute further to problems

Despite Carabias promises, however, the INE estimates another 2 million MT per year of waste are smuggled in from the US and dumped in the Mexican countryside. The INE statistics show that the imported wastes contain about 12,000 different substances, many of which are unknown in Mexico.

According to the environmental organization Greenpeace, Mexican authorities are frequently unable to control imports of waste from the US because of a lack of regulations to deal with the problem. "The waste is often imported by Mexican companies or by maquiladora operations through normal commercial channels under the label of raw materials," s Greenpeace spokesperson told Excelsior.

In fact, organizations that monitor US-Mexican environmental issues have charged that some Mexican companies such as cement manufacturers are importing hazardous materials from the US for use as an "alternate" fuel. According to two groups Alianza Nacional Ciudadana and Viento Abajo en Riesgo- -the material is imported with the full approval of Mexican environmental authorities. (Sources: EL Universal, 08/15/97;Excelsior, 08/08/97, 08/12/97, 08/14/97, 08/15/97, 08/18-20/97; La Jornada, 08/20/97)

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