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## Report Warns of Dangerous Increase in Air Contaminants in NAFTA Countries

by LADB Staff

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According to a study produced by the environmental commission of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), rapid industrial growth in the US, Canada, and Mexico has raised air pollution to dangerous levels for residents of the three countries. The report, released in early September by the NAFTA Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC), was conducted under the authority of Article 13 of the North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation, which is the official name for the NAFTA parallel accord on the environment. More than 30 scientists from the US, Mexico, and Canada participated in the study, which reviewed the origin, movement, and effects of air pollution in North America.

### *Toxic substances spread rapidly throughout continent*

The study noted special concern about a rapid increase in particles of mercury, pesticides, and acid rain, which are dispersing at an increasing rate throughout the North American continent. "Pollutants such as mercury and pesticides and even ozone and particulate matter travel great distances in North America and, once deposited on land or in water, bioaccumulate through food webs," the report said.

The CEC study largely attributed the increase in mercury levels throughout the continent to intensive industrial development in the US and Canada. "So much mercury has been emitted into the atmosphere in North America from electrical power plants, waste incinerators, and other key sources...that global atmospheric levels of this toxic element have been increased two- to fivefold during the past century," the CEC said.

According to the CEC, many of the most harmful pollutants are generated primarily by a relatively few sources common to the NAFTA countries: \* electric power plants \* emissions from trucks and other motor vehicles \* industrial usage of fossil fuels \* municipal and medical-waste incinerators \* chemicals used in agriculture The report said the pollution has caused numerous health-related problems, including chronic bronchitis, cardiorespiratory complications, and complications related to Alzheimer's disease.

According to the report, health risks are greatest for children, the elderly, pregnant women, individuals with respiratory problems, and indigenous populations. "Some of these pollutants can also remain in the atmosphere for decades and are linked to increased rates of chronic health problems and early mortality," the CEC noted. In addition to the health risks, the CEC report said heavy contamination of the air in North America has resulted in other environmental problems, such as the reduction and disappearance of fish in lakes and streams.

## *Report criticizes poor efforts to reduce vehicle emissions*

The study said the three countries have done a poor job in reducing emissions from motor vehicles, which are responsible for about one-third of carbon monoxide emissions in the North American continent. The CEC recommended that the three governments set targets and timetables to reduce air pollution throughout the continent and to review the impact of a pending restructuring of electricity markets. "The Secretariat of the CEC also calls on the governments to reverse the current disturbing trend in North America of severe cuts to the funds that are allocated to cross-border pollution research and air pollutant monitoring and modeling programs," reads the report.

## *New mayor pledges to combat air pollution in Mexico City*

In a related matter, Mexico City mayor-elect Cuauhtemoc Cardenas pledged to take new steps to reduce air pollution in the capital once he takes office in early December. Speaking to reporters, Cardenas said the problems of air pollution in the capital are manageable if the proper steps are taken. "We can reduce contamination if we approach the problem with a long-term solution," said Cardenas. In late July, the private consultant Delfos released a study showing that Mexico City's automobile-control program "Hoy No Circula" has failed to reduce air pollution in the capital by any significant amount.

The study, commissioned by the Mexico City government, also concluded that the program has done little to promote greater awareness among residents of the capital about problems related to air contamination. A separate report, released in early August, said the criteria to declare air-pollution emergencies in the capital may be too lenient. The report, produced by the Instituto Nacional de Salud Publica, recommended that the government lower the trigger for declaring pollution emergencies. Under current practice, authorities declare pollution emergencies when levels of ozone contamination reach 250 points on the Indice Metropolitano de la Calidad del Aire (IMECA). A level of 100 points on the IMECA scale is considered acceptable.

By waiting until ozone levels reach 250 points on the IMECA scale, the institute said authorities may be placing many vulnerable people at risk. On normal days, one-fifth of vehicles are banned from roads, based on a rotating system by license-plate numbers. The emergencies double the number of cars under that ban. Cardenas declined to criticize the current programs but said he would announce new initiatives after he takes office on Dec. 5. As a first step, the mayor-elect said he plans to meet with officials from the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales, y Pesca (SEMARNAP) to more clearly define the responsibilities of the municipal and the federal governments in the fight against pollution.

For example, Cardenas said, the federal government rather than the city must take responsibility for enforcing laws against industrial air pollution. Meanwhile, industry and government officials announced that the capital will receive a fleet of natural gas-powered buses by the end of the year. The new buses are part of Mexico's efforts to comply with its own strict new environmental laws that come into effect in 1998.

In an interview with Reuters, John Weber, president of the transportation company Penn Wilson, said his company is working with the Mexican government to build stations so natural gas-powered

passenger and utility vehicles can be on the streets by year-end. "The first CNG (compressed natural gas) station will be up and running before Christmas," said Weber. An industry source said the roughly 400 to 600 new buses will supplement, but not replace, Mexico's current fleet of buses. The government is also considering purchases of natural gas-powered vehicles from Ford Motor Co., General Motors Corp, and Grupo Dina. (Sources: Associated Press, 08/09/97; Novedades, 07/25/97, 08/22/97; Report from NAFTA Commission for Environmental Cooperation, 09/04/97; Excelsior, 08/22/97, 09/05/97; Reuter, 09/12/97; The News, 09/17/97)

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