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## **New Mexico City Mayor Faces Controversies Over Water, Air Programs**

by LADB Staff

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Mexico City Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas was forced to tackle two environmental controversies at the start of his administration in December: a decision to postpone construction of an additional aqueduct to supply water to residents of Mexico City and neighboring communities, and a proposal to redesign the capital city's air-pollution program. In early January, Mexico City public works director Cesar Buenrostro announced that construction of the aqueduct has been postponed until 1999 because of budget problems.

### ***Aqueduct postponed due to tight budget, environmental impact***

Buenrostro also cited the possible negative environmental impact the project would have on the water supplies in the two rivers, whose water levels have fallen in recent years. The 50-km aqueduct, which was about 50% complete at the end of 1997, was built to carry water from the Lerma and Cutzamala Rivers to the metropolitan area. The water from those rivers would supplement the supplies extracted from the aquifer below Mexico City.

But suspending construction of the aqueduct raised tensions between Cardenas a member of the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and legislators from the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), since the project was begun under former PRI mayor Oscar Espinosa Villarreal. The PRI is the governing party at the national level, but it is an opposition party in the Mexico City legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF). PRI legislators criticized Cardenas for stopping a program that would have increased water supplies for 2 million residents of the metropolitan area. "We hope the administration recognizes its strategic mistake and reverses its decision," said ALDF legislator Oscar Levin Coppel of the PRI.

PRI legislators also argued that the 6 billion pesos (US\$726 million) required to complete the third phase of the project had already been allocated by the ALDF, even though this decision came when the legislative body was dominated by the PRI. The Cardenas administration appears to be in a no-win situation regarding water supply. The alternative to the aqueduct is to continue extracting water from the aquifer below Mexico City. But the aquifer, which provides about 70% of the water used by residents in the metropolitan area, is falling rapidly, and the water extracted is increasingly contaminated.

### ***Administration to push water conservation***

As a partial solution, the Cardenas administration has proposed a campaign to encourage water conservation and replace aging pipelines and equipment to prevent leaks. Because of leakage from deteriorating pipes, 30% of the water in Mexico City is lost before reaching households. Ivan Restrepo, a columnist in the daily newspaper La Jornada, applauded the Cardenas administration's push for conservation. "It is a great challenge to change our ways, but we have to start recharging the aquifer," said Restrepo. "All studies show it is more economical and environmentally sound."

### *Mayor proposes to modify air-pollution program*

The proposal to revamp the city's air-pollution program also caused some controversy. Mexico City environmental director Alejandro Encinas raised some eyebrows when he suggested that the Cardenas administration may scrap the Hoy No Circula program. The program, implemented in 1989, attempts to reduce automobile emissions by requiring drivers to leave their vehicles home at least one day per week. Encinas said the administration may focus on fighting corruption at smog-verification centers, where owners frequently accept bribes to approve vehicles that fail an emissions test.

The Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) endorsed the campaign to end corruption, but it also urged the Cardenas administration to retain the Hoy No Circula program. PVEM director Jorge Gonzalez Torres said the program is necessary to combat air pollution in Mexico City. Rather than eliminating current programs, Gonzalez Torres urged the Cardenas government to fulfill campaign promises to combat air pollution. Among other things, Cardenas pledged to push service stations to sell cleaner fuel, encourage car pooling, expand light-train and electric-tram services, and implement credit programs so residents can exchange older vehicles for newer and cleaner cars. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Jan. 21, reported at 8.26 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: The News, 12/01/97, 12/02/97; La Jornada, 01/07/98; El Economista, 01/09/98; Notimex, 01/13/98, 01/14/98; Excelsior, 01/14/98; Novedades, 01/12/98, 01/15/98; El Universal, 01/07/98, 01/10/98, 01/21/98)

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