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Greenpeace Urges U.S. Ambassador to Stop Nuclear-Storage Site in South Texas

by LADB Staff

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The environmental organization Greenpeace has asked US Ambassador Jeffrey Davidow to intervene to stop the opening of the Sierra Blanca nuclear-waste storage facility in southwestern Texas. In a message to Davidow, Greenpeace members in Mexico said canceling the Sierra Blanca project could serve as a "sign of goodwill" to the Mexican people and would promote better US-Mexico relations. There was no immediate response from Davidow, who must deal with myriad US-Mexico bilateral issues, including immigration, drug trafficking, crime, and the US response to the crisis in Chiapas.

While the final decision on opening the facility is in the hands of the Texas government, Greenpeace argues that the US government has the power to pressure state authorities to cancel the project. The organization has asked Davidow to urge the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to intervene. In a recent statement, EPA administrator Carol Browner said she was leaving the decision regarding Sierra Blanca to the Texas authorities. The proposed Sierra Blanca facility, located 22 km from the US-Mexico border in Hudspeth County, Texas, would store radioactive waste from dismantled nuclear power plants, hospitals and industrial facilities in Vermont and Maine. Under a compact signed by the three states, Vermont and Maine have each agreed to pay Texas US\$25 million to bury low-level radioactive waste. The tristate compact has already been approved by the US House and Senate.

The Mexican government offered little opposition when the facility was first proposed in 1991. But in recent months, Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green, Environment Secretary Julia Carabias Lillo, and several Mexican legislators have denounced the project as violating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the 1983 Mexican-US environmental treaty signed in La Paz, Baja California Sur state (see SourceMex, 01/28/98). Texas judges recommend against permit for storage site Opponents of the Sierra Blanca site scored a victory in early July, when two state judges recommended that the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission reject the state's request for a license to open the facility.

The judges' decision does not necessarily prevent Texas state authorities from opening the facility but could move its start-up date beyond August. The judges accepted arguments from site opponents that a geologic fault running under the proposed facility could endanger nearby residents in the case of a spill. Opponents successfully argued that a leak could put at risk the health of 5 million persons in an area stretching from Ciudad Juarez- El Paso to Laredo-Nuevo Laredo. The judges' decision seemed to reject initial studies from proponents of the facility, which said the site was selected because it is sparsely populated and has a low risk of earthquakes.

During a visit to Mexico City in May of this year, Texas Gov. George W. Bush pledged his administration would oppose the site if it failed to meet the strictest safety guidelines (see

SourceMex, 05/13/98). But Bush appears to have since changed his stance. In June, the governor declined to meet with a delegation of Mexican state and federal legislators who were visiting Austin to garner the governor's pledge to stop the opening of the facility. A month later, Bush said he was "perturbed" by the state judges' recommendation that a permit for opening Sierra Blanca be rejected. Mexican legislators have vowed to press on in their opposition to opening the dump. "We cannot permit the US to build nuclear garbage dumps on our border," said federal Sen. Norberto Corella of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). "This is something we cannot and will not permit." Corella was part of the Mexican legislative delegation that visited Austin in June. (Sources: The Christian Science Monitor, The Dallas Morning News, 06/18/98; El Nacional, El Universal, 07/09/98; Novedades, Excelsior, 07/23/98)

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