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## Zedillo Government Criticized for Endorsing Nuclear Waste Site in Texas

by LADB Staff

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Mexican legislators, including several members of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), are angry with President Ernesto Zedillo's administration for endorsing the proposed Sierra Blanca nuclear-waste storage facility in southwestern Texas. The Zedillo administration announced its support for the project on Sept. 6, less than a week after the US Senate approved a compact allowing the states of Maine and Vermont to ship nuclear waste produced at hospitals and research facilities to the Sierra Blanca storage site.

The proposed site is located in Hudspeth County, Texas, 22 km from the US- Mexico border. Until now, the Mexican government had strongly opposed the opening of the Sierra Blanca site because of concerns that leakages could contaminate water supplies on both sides of the border.

In opposing the project, the Mexican government said the site violated terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the 1983 La Paz environmental agreement (see SourceMex, 01/28/98 and 07/29/98).

### *Administration says studies confirm project is "safe"*

But the Zedillo administration dropped its strong opposition to the project in early September, citing results of a study conducted by its team of experts from the Comision Nacional de Agua (CNA) and the Comision de Seguridad Nuclear y Salvaguardias (CONASENUSA). "The site represents no threat whatsoever to the population and the environment of our country, if the construction and operation are carried out according to plan," said a statement issued by the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), the Secretaria de Energia (SE), and the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales, y Pesca (SEMARNAP).

The administration's only negative comment in the statement was that opening Sierra Blanca "does not help foster a good-neighbor policy." In endorsing the project, the administration ignored a written request from four key committees in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate to take a firm stance against Sierra Blanca. The request came the day after the US Senate approved the compact. Senators urge Zedillo to reconsider position In a letter to Zedillo, senators from the PRI and the opposition Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) urged the administration to reconsider its endorsement of the project. The senators said the administration's changed position was a "dagger in the back" of Mexican and US citizens who had long opposed the project.

Environment Secretary Julia Carabias Lillo and Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green, who have been outspoken critics of the Sierra Blanca site, issued strongly worded statements in the aftermath of the US Senate's vote to approve the compact. However, Carabias and Green toned

down their criticism after their secretariats endorsed the project. US President Bill Clinton must sign the compact approved by the Senate before it can take effect. The compact would pave the way for the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission to approve a permit for the Sierra Blanca site at its meeting in early November. The Sierra Blanca project is supported by US Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) and Phil Gramm (R-TX). "The people of Hudspeth County want this," Sen. Bailey Hutchison argued during debate on the bill. "The local support is there."

However, the project is opposed by US voters in communities outside Hudspeth County, but near the Sierra Blanca facility. A public opinion poll conducted by The El Paso Times newspaper and El Paso television station KVIA showed overwhelming opposition to the project among residents of El Paso, Texas. In the poll, 84% of participants opposed the opening of Sierra Blanca, compared with only 12% who support the facility. The other 4% were undecided.

Environment Secretary Julia Carabias is said to personally oppose the project despite SEMARNAP's endorsement. In her most recent statement, Carabias called for the US to move the site away from a 100-km US-Mexico border area and the centers of population in Mexico. Carabias also questioned why a matter affecting US-Mexico relations was ultimately in the hands of a state government and not the federal government. Meanwhile, the international environmental organization Greenpeace chastised the Zedillo administration for caving in to supporters of the Sierra Blanca site in Texas.

Greenpeace said the studies presented by the CNA and CONASENUSA were based on data provided by Texas state officials. "The administration lacked its own independent information," said Greenpeace. The organization said the Zedillo administration may have a hidden agenda in its support for the project. If the Mexican government insisted on opposing Sierra Blanca, said Greenpeace, the US would have the right to demand that Mexico retire its own toxic wastes from the US-Mexico border area.

Furthermore, the Mexican government does not want to appear hypocritical in opposing the Sierra Blanca site while seeking support for construction of its nuclear-storage facility to handle waste from the Laguna Verde nuclear-power plant in Veracruz. (Sources: San Antonio Express-News, 09/03/98, 09/04/98; Reuters, 09/03/98, 09/06/98; The Boston Globe, 09/08/98; El Nacional, 09/09/98; La Jornada, El Universal, 09/03/98, 09/04/98, 09/08/98, 09/09/98, 09/11/98; El Economista, 09/04/98, 09/11/98; Novedades, 09/04/98, 09/08/98, 09/09/98, 09/11/98; The News, 09/04/98, 09/09/98, 09/10/98, 09/11/98; Excelsior, 09/04/98, 09/08/98, 09/09/98, 09/11/98, 09/15/98)

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