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Texas Commission Denies Permit for Sierra Blanca Nuclear-Waste Site

by LADB Staff

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In late October, a Texas commission voted against issuing a permit to open the Sierra Blanca nuclear-waste storage site in southwestern Texas, thus defusing a potential conflict between the US and Mexico. Proponents of the storage site had planned to store low-level radioactive waste from hospitals and nuclear power plants in Maine and Vermont at the storage site in Sierra Blanca, Texas. A state agency, the Texas Low-Level Radioactive Waste-Disposal Authority, was to build and manage the facility.

The Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC), in a unanimous ruling, said the proposed storage site was too close to a geologic fault, putting area residents at risk in the event of an earthquake. The TNRCC said proponents of the site also failed to consider all the potential social and economic effects of the site on nearby communities in the US and Mexico. The TNRCC ruling is a victory for site opponents in Mexico and the US, who had lobbied heavily against it. They argued that any leakage of radioactive waste from the Sierra Blanca storage site would contaminate the water supply on both sides of the Rio Grande.

The proposed site was located only a few kilometers from the US-Mexico border and 144 km east of El Paso, Texas. The opposition in Mexico was led by a broad coalition of federal and state legislators and environmental organizations. The coalition argued that locating the site near the US-Mexico border violated a 1983 US-Mexico environmental treaty signed in La Paz, Baja California Sur state (see SourceMex, 01/28/98 and 07/29/98).

Until the TNRCC decision was handed down, the Mexican legislative coalition led by Sen. Luis H. Alvarez of the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and Deputy Laura Itzel Castillo of the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) was planning to bring the matter before a commission of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In a letter to Janine Ferreti, interim director of NAFTA's Environmental Cooperation Commission (ECC), the Mexican legislators accused the US federal government of failing to take action on 170 environmental violations uncovered during inspections of the Sierra Blanca site.

A group of 10 federal and local legislators led by federal Deputy Carlos Camacho Alcazar and former Ciudad Juarez city councilor Jose Luis Rodriguez dramatized their opposition to the site by leading a fast in front of the residence of Texas Gov. George W. Bush. President Ernesto Zedillo's administration had endorsed the facility in early September, citing results of a study conducted by its experts from the Comision Nacional de Agua (CNA) and the Comision de Seguridad Nuclear y Salvaguardias (CONASENUSA).

The administration's initial support had come despite opposition from individual Cabinet members, including Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green Macias and Environment Secretary Julia

Carabias Lillo (see SourceMex, 07/29/98). Zedillo administration reverses earlier support for site The administration reassessed its position following strong protests from legislators and environmental groups. Just days before the TNRCC vote, Zedillo and Energy Secretary Luis Tellez raised safety concerns during a meeting with US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson.

The administration had also sought to appease opponents in Mexico by releasing the contents of a letter to the US State Department asking that the US government relocate the site away from the border. "With this request, the Mexican government echoes the clamor of lawmakers and Mexican civil organizations from both sides of the border that have protested the construction of the waste-confinement center in Sierra Blanca, Texas," a statement from the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores said following the release of the letter. Sen. Alvarez, who chairs the Senate environmental committee (Comision de Medio Ambiente), said the administration's late decision to oppose the project was almost inconsequential. "We felt that the Mexican government was absent from the social movement to oppose this project," Alvarez told reporters.

Environmental groups welcomed the TNRCC decision but challenged Mexican legislators to seek negotiations with US counterparts to amend the 1983 La Paz treaty. Roberto Lopez, a spokesperson for Greenpeace de Mexico, said the treaty should include language prohibiting the installation of nuclear-waste storage facilities within 100 km of the US- Mexico border. Environment Secretary Carabias endorsed the concept presented by the environmental organizations, but also proposed that US and Mexican authorities create mechanisms for more frequent consultations on environmental matters. "Our disagreements do not need to reach the extremes reached in recent days," said Carabias. (Sources: Notimex, 10/14/98; El Economista, 10/20/98, 10/21/98, 10/22/98; The News, 10/22/98; San Antonio Express-News, 10/07/98, 10/23/98; Spanish news service EFE, 10/16/98, 10/19/98, 10/21-23/98; The Chicago Tribune, 10/19/98, 10/23/98; Associated Press, The Dallas Morning News, 10/22/98, 10/23/98; La Jornada, Novedades, 10/20/98, 10/22/98, 10/23/98; The Washington Post, 10/23/98; El Universal, 10/20/98, 10/21/98, 10/22/98, 10/23/98; Excelsior, 10/15/98, 10/19/98, 10/20/98, 10/21/98, 10/22/98, 10/23/98, 10/26/98; El Financiero International, 10/26/98)

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