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## **Environmental Groups Urge Mexican Government to Cut Industrial Pollution**

*by LADB Staff*

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Several environmental organizations are pushing the federal environmental protection agency Procuraduria Federal del Medio Ambiente (PROFEPA) to take more forceful steps to prevent the spread of industrial pollution and dumping of toxic wastes.

In January, the international environmental organization Greenpeace launched a campaign to prevent the development of the Cerro San Pedro gold- and silver-mining project in San Luis Potosi state. The project was proposed by Canadian mining company Cambior and its Mexican subsidiary Minera San Xavier. Commercial production could start by late 1999 if the project receives approval from the Instituto Nacional de Ecologia (INE) and other federal agencies.

Greenpeace intervened at the request of local groups who are concerned that the mine will produce large amounts of toxic cyanide, mercury, and explosive materials. In addition to toxic emissions, the environmental organization also contends that the project could damage flora and fauna and cause harm to nearby archeological zones. Furthermore, Greenpeace spokespersons questioned Cambior's commitment to safety. The company has been responsible for recent cyanide spills in Oman and the US, they said.

Other mining companies have recently been accused of producing substances harmful to local residents. Compania Minera de Cananea could face an investigation for contaminating soil and water at its mine in Sonora state. Federal legislator Hector Larios Cordova of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) said the potential pollution problems came to light during a legislative investigation of a prolonged miners strike at the Sonora mine.

Larios Cordova said his legislative commission has requested that the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) closely examine the company's copper-washing process, which has caused extensive contamination of soils, subsoils, rivers, and water tables in the area.

Meanwhile, in Coahuila state in early February, state health authorities started offering blood tests to pregnant women to check for signs of lead poisoning caused by emissions from a lead mine near the city of Torreon. The lead mine is part of a mining complex operated by Grupo Penoles. A local health official, Jaime Pineda, said 116 of the 527 women tested showed some signs of lead poisoning.

### ***Some protests directed against government agencies***

Some government agencies have also come under intense scrutiny for their anti-environmental practices. In mid- February, the Alianza Binacional contra Tiraderos Toxicos y Residuos Peligrosos took over the headquarters of the Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE) in Ciudad Juarez.

The environmental group accused the Mexican utility company of dumping toxic chemicals on agricultural lands in northern Chihuahua. Manuel Robles Flores, coordinator of the group, said the takeover of the CFE was intended to expose the utility's anti-environmental practices. But the strongest criticisms against government entities have been directed at the state-run oil company PEMEX. \

In a report published in early February, Greenpeace criticized PEMEX and PROFEPA for underreporting the number of oil spills in Mexico last year. Records released by PROFEPA indicated that 423 oil spills occurred during 1998. However, Greenpeace said internal records show that at least 572 oil spills took place during the year. "We are all aware of PEMEX's poor environmental record and its policies to hide ecological damage," said Alejandro Calvillo, director of Greenpeace's office in Mexico City. "But we are surprised that PROFEPA conspired to minimize and hide the total number of oil spills during 1998."

Greenpeace and PEMEX have been at odds for several years. In December 1998, Greenpeace accused PEMEX of dumping oil residues into cesspools in the city of Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz state. The oil residues were leaking into the city's water supply. Greenpeace was also one of several environmental groups that recently pressured PEMEX to remove obsolete platforms in the Santa Ana oil field off the coast of Campeche. The rusted platforms, which have been out of use since the mid-1980s, were beginning to contaminate nearby waters. Mexican environmental organizations are also urging the federal government to take stronger steps to prevent random dumping of toxic wastes by private companies.

In a press conference in early February, the Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA) said disposal companies are illegally dumping infectious and toxic waste in open-air sites throughout Mexico. CEMDA spokesman Gustavo Alanis said less than half of Mexico's toxic waste is handled within strict legal and ecological guidelines. "This raises the question, where is the rest?" asked Alanis at the news conference. "It's in open-air dumps, on wasteland, buried, in the country's waterways."

CEMDA said waste-disposal companies in large cities often disguise toxic residues by mixing them with ordinary garbage. This practice creates major health dangers for Mexicans who make a living by sifting through city garbage dumps. An INE spokesperson acknowledged the need for more regulation and monitoring of disposal practices. In an interview with Reuters news agency, the INE official said his agency is able to monitor only about 3.4 million metric tons of the 8 million MT of toxic wastes produced annually in Mexico. A large share of the toxic waste dumped in Mexico originates in the US.

In early February, the Mexican Senate's Comision de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales criticized federal and Sonora state officials for failing to act against the parties responsible for illegally dumping several thousand tons of toxic waste near Hermosillo. The site is said to include old batteries, which contain high levels of cadmium, an extremely toxic substance. The batteries were apparently brought there from the US by a Spanish company. (Sources: Reuters, 01/21/99, 02/01/99, 02/03/99; Spanish news service EFE, 01/21/99, 02/03/99; Associated Press, 02/03/99; Novedades, 02/04/99; Excelsior, 02/08/99; El Universal, 02/08/99, 02/10/99)

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