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Death of Marine Mammals Along Pacific Coast Linked to Industrial Pollution

by LADB Staff

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The deaths of dozens of gray whales and hundreds of other sea mammals along Mexico's Pacific Coast this year has widened the rift between environmental advocates and President Ernesto Zedillo's administration. Environmental groups such as Grupo de los Cien and Greenpeace Mexico attribute the deaths to increased industrial development along Mexico's Pacific Coast.

The groups say oil drilling, discharges by mining companies, and other sources of industrial pollution have caused the deaths of at least 800 sea mammals since 1993. The environmental-protection advocates say one company in particular, Exportadora de Sal S.A. (ESSA), has been responsible for a significant number of the wildlife deaths along the coast of Baja California Sur. ESSA, 51% of which is owned by the Mexican government and 49% by the Japanese company Mitsubishi, has been accused of discharging brine and other pollutants near Laguna Guerrero Negro. This lagoon is one of several breeding areas for gray whales in the Baja California Peninsula.

ESSA extracts 1.5 million cubic meters of salt on 54,000 hectares along the coast of Baja California Sur and exports a large portion of its output to Japan and other Asian countries. The company has requested a permit to expand its extraction operations to areas near Laguna Ojo de Liebre and Laguna San Ignacio. The two lagoons are part of El Vizcaino reserve, designated a protected biosphere by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

As part of the expansion, ESSA has proposed a new salt- evaporation plant near Laguna San Ignacio. Company officials contend the existing facility in the town of Guerrero Negro cannot be sufficiently modernized to achieve the large production increases required by ESSA. "When I see what's planned [in San Ignacio], I don't see that the pristine lagoon is going to change," said James Brumm, general counsel for Mitsubishi International Corp. in New York. "Nothing is being done but let the water flow into an area, let it evaporate, and then scoop up what remains. This is not heavy industry. It's very low tech."

Groups seek to halt expansion of Mexican-Japanese salt company

But ESSA's expansion plans have drawn strong opposition from Grupo de los Cien, Greenpeace Mexico, and US-based environmental groups International Fund for Animal Welfare and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Environmentalists say extracting large amounts of salt could cause permanent damage to the area's ecology by altering water levels and temperatures and eliminating sources of food for many marine animals. "If the government accepts this project, the concept of a biosphere reserve is meaningless," said Homero Aridjis, director of Grupo de los Cien.

As part of their strategy to fight the ESSA expansion, 50 environmental organizations led by Greenpeace Mexico and Grupo de los Cien recently filed a complaint with the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) accusing the government of failing to prosecute environmental violations

by ESSA. "We want the government to apply the law in this case, and make those responsible for the damage pay," environmental lawyer Alberto Szekely told reporters after presenting the 24-page complaint to the PGR. At least four instances of massive deaths of whales and other marine mammals have occurred since 1993, but the most serious happened this year. Grupo de los Cien said the pollution caused by ESSA's existing salt-evaporation plant could be responsible for at least 50 whale deaths this year along the coasts of Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California Sur states, an all-time high for the migratory season. "This is the worst case ever recorded in Mexico," said Aridjis.

Government studies called incomplete

The Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Medio Ambiente (PROFEPA) has conducted studies on the mammal deaths. Those studies suggested the whales and marine mammals died of natural causes or from ingestion of a fluorescent chemical called NK-19 used by drug traffickers to mark spots at sea where they drop cocaine packets. But environmentalists contend the PROFEPA studies are incomplete because they failed to consider the impact of runoff of pesticides and industrial chemicals into the ocean.

Greenpeace Mexico said agricultural discharges of polychlorinated biphenyl, also known as PCBs, may have led to immunological deficiencies in the sea mammals. "Each time there are massive deaths, our authorities come out saying it was the famous NK-19 or red tide or natural causes," said Juan Carlos Cantu, who heads the biodiversity program for Greenpeace Mexico. "It's absurd. You'd have to fill the Gulf of California with this substance [NK-19]" to have such a deadly effect. Meanwhile, the Zedillo administration has instructed the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) to assemble a group of scientists to conduct a more comprehensive environmental-impact study to assess the feasibility of the ESSA expansion.

But Mexican environmental organizations are skeptical that the study will be impartial and comprehensive enough. "In Mexico, you can't trust people in the government to make independent decisions," Aridjis said. "These are always politically oriented decisions." Aridjis acknowledged that environmental groups face an uphill battle in their opposition to the new salt-evaporation plant, since the Secretaria de Comercio y Fomento Industrial (SECOFI) owns a majority share in ESSA. Because of this, Mexican and US environmental organizations have called for an independent and in-depth study of the mammal deaths. "Without a doubt, an in-depth study...would find that the Gulf of California is a real cocktail of pollutants," said Greenpeace Mexico spokesman Roberto Lopez.

The Mexican Congress is also expected to provide input on whether the ESSA expansion can proceed. In late February, a 12-member delegation from the five parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies traveled to Baja California Sur to assess the situation. Deputy Jose Carlos Cota Osuna of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) said legislators would oppose the project if the SEMARNAP environmental-impact study drew a connection between ESSA's operations and the deaths of wildlife in the area. But legislators could also be swayed by the economic impact of the ESSA expansion on Baja California Sur and on Mexico.

Cota Osuna said the new ESSA facility could convert Mexico into the largest salt producer in the Pacific basin. "If the environmental-impact study proves that the salt works and its environment

can coexist without any [adverse] consequences, we will give our full support to this project," Cota Osuna said. (Sources: The Washington Post, 02/21/98; La Jornada, 03/08/99; El Universal, 02/19/99, 02/26/99, 03/10/99; El Diario de Yucatan, Spanish news service EFE, 03/10/99; Associated Press, 03/10/99, 03/11/99, 03/12/99, 03/16/99; Reuters, 02/22/99, 02/25/99, 03/02/99, 03/10/99, 03/15/99)

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