

5-26-1999

Lead-Poison Problems Surface at Penoles Plant in Coahuila

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Lead-Poison Problems Surface at Penoles Plant in Coahuila." (1999). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/4085>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Lead-Poison Problems Surface at Penoles Plant in Coahuila

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1999-05-26

The government's environmental protection agency (Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Medio Ambiente, PROFEPA) has ordered the mining company Industrias Penoles to reduce production by 50% at its Met-Mex plant in Coahuila state because of continuing problems with lead poisoning. The latest directive, issued May 20, further tightens an earlier environmental-emergency declaration by PROFEPA for the Met-Mex site on the outskirts of Torreon. PROFEPA is a division of the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP). PROFEPA director Antonio Azuela de la Cueva said the agency would consider shutting the facility altogether if Industrias Penoles fails to solve the problem to the government's satisfaction.

The agency originally ordered Penoles to reduce production at the Met-Mex plant by one-fourth in early May, after studies found that more than 1,100 children residing near the Met-Mex site had unacceptable levels of lead in their blood. SEMARNAP and the Secretaria de Salud (SSA) followed up the PROFEPA directive by ordering Penoles to create a health-care fund of 60 million pesos (US \$6.2 million) to treat the victims.

Hector Reyes, a spokesman for the Coahuila state health department, said residents of the primarily low-income Luis Echeverria neighborhood, which surrounds the Met-Mex plant, were probably poisoned after breathing plant emissions and dust from toxic wastes dumped in a huge mound outside the plant. When ingested, lead tends to accumulate in the bone marrow, nerves and kidneys.

Lead poisoning can result in digestive problems, mental disturbances, and paralysis. Some environmental organizations praised the government for taking a tough stance against Penoles. "This is the first time PROFEPA has acted against a mining company," said Homero Aridjis, president of the prominent environmental organization Grupo de los Cien. "This is a positive step." Government criticized for delay in taking action But other environmental-protection advocates and Coahuila state legislators criticized federal and state authorities for taking so long to act against Industrias Penoles. They said regulators failed to stop Penoles from piling up toxic wastes in the open air for 17 years. "The authorities have always been accomplices of the company, knowing that the health of the children was at risk," said Jesus Lopez Pina, an independent lawmaker in the Coahuila state legislature.

A special multiparty commission in the Coahuila state legislature urged the firing of Lourdes Quintanilla, the state's health and community development director. The commission blamed Quintanilla for failing to act while the problem worsened. Meanwhile, two members of the Partido Cardenista Coahuilense have appealed to President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to shut down or relocate the Met-Mex plant. But some representatives of the local chapters of the Camara Nacional de la Industria de la Transformacion (CANACINTRA) and the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE) urged authorities to consider the economic implications of a shutdown, which could result in a massive job loss. The plant employs more than 2,200 workers.

CANACINTRA and CCE leaders said Torreon city planners were partly to blame, since they allowed the development of the Luis Echeverria neighborhood in the area surrounding the Met-Mex plant, which was once isolated from populations centers. A Penoles spokesperson said the company would comply with all state and federal directives to keep the facility open. "We are going to do everything possible to preserve our source of jobs, whatever the authorities order," said Camilo Valdez, the company's director of environmental affairs. [Note: Peso- dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 26, reported at 9.67 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Associated Press, 05/05/99; Reuters, 05/06/99; El Financiero International, 05/10/99; El Economista, 05/07/99, 05/12/99, 05/13/99; Excelsior, 05/13/99; El Universal, 03/28/99, 05/06/99, 05/11/99, 05/18/99; Reuters, 05/12/99, 05/21/99; Novedades, 05/12/99, 05/18/99; Los Angeles Times, 05/20/99)

-- End --