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Environment Briefs: Salt Plant, Isthmus Project, NAFTA Norms

by LADB Staff

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Scientists urge Mexico to scrap plans for salt plant

A group of prominent scientists has launched a campaign to convince the Mexican government and Japan's Mitsubishi Corp. to scrap their plan to construct a salt-processing plant near Laguna San Ignacio in Baja California Sur state, a known breeding site for gray whales. The 33 scientists, including several Nobel laureates, made their appeal directly in letters to the parties involved and indirectly through a newspaper advertisement in The New York Times and in major Mexican newspapers.

The Mexican government and Mitsubishi have formed the Exportadora de Sal (ESSA) corporation to extract salt from Baja California and export the processed product to Japan and other countries in Asia. The proposal has met strong objections from environmental groups in Mexico that say discharges of brine and pollutants into the area are responsible for many whale deaths (see SourceMex, 1999-03-17).

In their letters to President Ernesto Zedillo's administration and Mitsubishi, the scientists said constructing the salt-evaporation plant at Laguna San Ignacio would pose three main risks to gray whales: the loss of habitat, the threat of collisions with ships, and the accumulation of contaminants in the whales' bodies. "A new salt works at San Ignacio constitutes a real threat to the ecosystem, to marine and animal life, including the gray whale, which uses this lagoon to give birth and to reproduce," the scientists said.

The controversy has divided area residents, some of whom support the environmental groups while others see the plant as a source of new jobs for the area.

Study foresees extensive damage from Tehuantepec project

A study produced by the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM) says the huge transportation project planned for the Tehuantepec Isthmus in southern Mexico could severely damage the region's ecology.

The project, which the government is promoting as an alternative route to the Panama Canal, would connect the ports of Salina Cruz on the Pacific Ocean with Coatzacoalcos on the Gulf of Mexico through a superhighway and high-speed railroad. But the study, a cooperative effort by several UAM departments, said construction of these transportation venues could negatively affect the region's biodiversity, considered one of the most varied in the world.

Antonio Flores Diaz, a professor in the UAM's environmental studies department, said the project will cause numerous ecological problems in the region, such as significant loss of flora and

fauna, climate changes, and an increase in erosion. "In 50 years, this region is going to become a desert," said Flores. In addition, the UAM study said the project is expected to accelerate the exploitation of minerals, wood, and other raw materials in the region, causing further damage. From a socioeconomic standpoint, the study said development of the region will displace indigenous communities.

Professor Teresa Payan Porras, who teaches at UAM's education department, said the communities would be replaced by manufacturing and assembly plants, which could have unfavorable implications for inhabitants of small communities along the route in Veracruz and Oaxaca states.

Group says Mexico failing to meet NAFTA environmental norms

A report by Mexico's Asociacion Nacional de Industrias del Medio Ambiente found that most small and medium-sized industrial businesses in Mexico are failing to comply with environmental norms spelled out under the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Association president Pedro Murad Robles said half the medium-sized businesses and virtually all the small and microenterprises involved in industrial production lack the proper equipment to treat industrial waste and reduce emissions of harmful materials into the air.

Since small and medium-sized enterprises account for 90% of all businesses in the country, Mexico has fallen far short of meeting the NAFTA environmental regulations. As a result, Murad said, Mexico could face sanctions under NAFTA. The Secretaria de Comercio y Fomento Industrial (SECOFI) and the Secretaria de Hacienda y Credito Publico (SHCP) have offered credits and other incentives to small and medium-sized businesses to acquire the proper equipment to deal with waste. But Murad said many eligible businesses have failed to take advantage of these programs because of a lack of promotion on the part of the two government agencies.

In contrast, Murad said, many large companies have the funds to install anti-pollution equipment and many are complying with emissions regulations. A recent study published in the daily newspaper Excelsior said Mexico's four largest auto-assembly companies invested more than US \$600 million since 1995 to reduce air emissions to meet NAFTA standards. Murad's report, however, did not address other complaints that several large companies have damaged the environment through other means such as dumping hazardous materials into waterways and clandestine dumps.

A recent complaint charged that Alco Pacifico Mexico, a subsidiary of US-based Alco Pacific Inc., illegally disposed of 300,000 cubic meters of waste contaminated with lead in Mexico. In a more prominent case, the Mexican government ordered mining company Industrias Penoles to curtail production at a plant in Coahuila because of extensive problems with lead poisoning to area residents (see SourceMex, 1999-05-26). [Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 04/28/99; Reuters, 07/10/99; El Universal, 07/12/99; Excelsior, 06/29/99, 07/15/99; Associated Press, 07/15/99; Novedades, 07/16/99; El Economista, 07/19/99)

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