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## Japanese-Mexican Partnership Continues to Push for Salt Plant in Protected Area

by LADB Staff

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The salt-processing company Exportadora de Sal (ESSA) has intensified efforts to convince Mexican environmental authorities to issue the proper permits to allow the construction of a new facility near an environmentally sensitive area in Baja California Sur state. ESSA, a joint venture between Japanese-based Mitsubishi and Mexico's Secretaria de Comercio y Fomento Industrial (SECOFI), has proposed the plant at a site near Laguna San Ignacio.

The company claims the new plant is needed because existing facilities south of Guerrero Negro are insufficient to meet demand for salt from customers in Japan and other Asian nations. The company's argument is countered by claims from environmental groups that ESSA's salt-extraction and the resulting discharge of brine have been responsible for the deaths of dozens of whales and scores of other wildlife in the area (see SourceMex, 1999-03-17).

In early November, ESSA officials released the results of a preliminary study by UN scientists, which said the construction of the new plant near EL Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve would pose no danger to area wildlife. The reserve has been designated as a world heritage site by the UN Environmental, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and is one of only four breeding sites for gray whales.

ESSA spokesman Oscar Kaufman told reporters that UN scientists, who are part of a UNESCO team that conducted an intensive study of the area in August, have determined that the proposed plant would pose no danger to the area's ecology.

"The UNESCO report says the reserve is in good condition and that the gray whale is safe," Kaufman told reporters. The findings by the UNESCO scientists are preliminary, however, and the UN organization has not officially endorsed the construction of the new plant. The findings must still receive approval from UNESCO's Committee for Safeguarding Humanity. ESSA officials are also banking on the results of an environmental-impact study conducted by marine-wildlife experts hired by the company.

The two-year study, which is nearing its completion, will offer further proof that the new plant will not have an adverse environmental impact on El Vizcaino reserve, the officials said. "We are concerned that the strong international pressure will win out over reason and scientific facts," ESSA director Joaquin Ardura told reporters. Ardura said the study will attempt to provide 100% certainty that the ESSA project is environmentally sound. "[The report] offers possibilities for fisheries and the ecosystem, while at the same time promoting development of the local community," Ardura told reporters.

Earlier this year, ESSA pledged to scrap the project if the Secretaria de Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) rules that the new plant poses a danger to El Vizcaino reserve. "We certainly don't want to be involved here or anyplace else in a project that would have environmental danger," said James Brumm, executive vice president for Mitsubishi International. "It's not something that we want to be known for." The growing public pressure, however, has forced ESSA to modify the project to minimize possible environmental damage.

The project also faces potential roadblocks from the opposition Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM). Legislators from the environmentally oriented party are concerned that the government may have a conflict of interest in making the final decision on the project, since SECOFI is a part owner of ESSA. At a hearing earlier this year, PVEM Deputy Jorge Emilio Gonzalez Martinez questioned the government's decision to allow ESSA to appeal an earlier decision that denied a permit to construct the facility at Laguna San Ignacio.

The government denied the permit in 1995 after uncovering almost 300 environmental violations by ESSA. These violations ranged from unauthorized discharges of brine into the ocean to dumping used industrial batteries in the lagoon. "Why is the government reconsidering ESSA's proposal, when the project was once declared illegal?" asked Gonzalez.

### *Environmental groups intensify campaign against plant*

Mexican and international environmental organizations have also intensified their campaign against the construction of the salt plant in the face of the company's renewed efforts to secure permits for the facility. On Nov. 4, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) warned that Mexico could lose millions of dollars in international funds devoted to environmental protection. "If the project to industrialize the site proceeds, the Global Environmental Fund would have reason to cancel economic assistance for protected areas," said Guillermo Castilleja, a WWF representative in Mexico.

Castilleja said the WWF wants Mexican authorities to consider other economic-development alternatives for the region, such as ecotourism. Jean-Michel Cousteau, president of Ocean Futures Society, has joined the growing number of environmental experts speaking out against the project. In testimony before the Chamber of Deputies, Cousteau said ESSA's project is not compatible with the spirit of environmental protection. Cousteau is the son of the late oceanographer Jacques Cousteau.

The statements from Cousteau and the WWF followed a letter written by a group of 34 prominent international scientists opposing the ESSA project. The letter was published in several newspapers in Mexico and other countries (see SourceMex, 1999-07-28). The environmental organizations have received some support from the business community. In October, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) said that a group of 15 mutual funds plans to boycott Mitsubishi stocks if the project is approved. The mutual funds, which include the Calvert Group, the Pax World Family Fund, and the Global Environment Fund, handle US\$14 billion in assets. (Sources: The News, 09/30/99; Associated Press, 10/03/99; Excelsior, 10/26/99; Reuters, 10/21/99, 10/22/99, 11/03/99; El Universal, 08/26/99, 11/04/99; El Universal, 11/04/99, 11/05/99; El Economista, La Jornada, Novedades, 11/05/99)

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