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Fox Government to Build Controversial Hydroelectric Dam in Guerrero

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2005-09-14

President Vicente Fox's administration is proceeding with the construction of the controversial hydroelectric plant La Parota in Guerrero state after residents of 18 communal farms (ejidos) voted overwhelmingly to support the project.

The Fox government initially proposed the project in early 2004, but delayed the final proposal until the middle of 2005 to conduct further feasibility studies. Construction of the 900-megawatt plant which will provide electricity for a large area of western Mexico, including the resort city of Acapulco is expected to take five years to complete.

The Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE) will begin soliciting bids from construction companies in the coming weeks. La Parota will surpass the capabilities of El Cajon in Nayarit state, which is the Fox administration's other major hydroelectric project. Construction of El Cajon, which will have a capacity of 750 MW, is about 50% complete.

The Fox administration, which promised that construction of the facility would bring tens of thousands of jobs to the area, plus schools, hospitals, and other facilities, easily gained support from residents of the 18 ejidos.

In a vote in late August in the community of San Marcos in Guerrero state, ejido residents voted by an overwhelming margin of 2,785 to 50 to allow the CFE to proceed with construction of the plant on their land. Opponents fear project will displace some communities Support for the project is not unanimous, however, with a strong contingent of ejido residents opposed to the project because of its potential displacement of as many 20,000 residents of 13 local communities in three municipalities.

Many residents opted not to participate in the vote, calling the election illegal. Critics say ejidos that are displaced by huge projects like La Parota are primarily indigenous communities, which not only lose their traditional lands and properties but ultimately their cultural identity.

"Construction of hydroelectric and irrigation dams has resulted in the dismantling of communities, leaving many unable to recover their original social and economic vitality," said Salomon Nahmad in a 1999 report commissioned by the World Commission on Dams. "Years later, some remain overly dependent on federal government resources." Nahmad's report studied the impact of hydroelectric dams on indigenous peoples as a whole, focusing on the Chinteco, Otomi, and Huichol communities.
The report did not necessarily argue against dam construction on indigenous lands, but criticized the lack of government policies to deal with the displacements. Environmental advocate Talli Nauman, who writes a weekly column for the Mexico City daily English-language newspaper The Herald, was more blunt in her opposition to the construction of large hydroelectric dams. She sided with opponents, who argue that La Parota, with its huge capacity, is intended primarily to help large Mexican and foreign corporations. "

Not surprisingly, this threat has spawned protests by farmers who don't want to be converted into landless itinerants," said Nauman, founder and co-director of Journalism to Raise Environmental Awareness, a project initiated with support from the MacArthur Foundation.

The opponents of La Parota, who have organized themselves as the El Consejo de Ejidos y Comunidades Opositoras a La Parota (CECOP), said they would not recognize any agreements signed between ejido dwellers and the CFE relative to the La Parota project. CECOP has threatened to block roads and organize a huge march from Guerrero to Mexico City to bring attention to their concerns about La Parota.

Prior to the vote, CECOP made its opposition to the dam known through demonstrations, some of which resulted in confrontations with police. "We are declaring war on the CFE," said CECOP leaders, who also lamented the public support that Gov. Zeferino Torreblanca and presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador have given to the project. Both Torreblanca and Lopez Obrador are members of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). CECOP leaders said the PRD's position would leave opponents no choice but to withhold support for the party's candidates in the 2006 presidential and congressional elections. "There will be a lot of abstentionism among residents of the ejido," they said.

The strong opposition from CECOP had led the Fox administration to consider a request from some communities in Nayarit that the project be moved to that state. "Some residents of Nayarit had asked that we construct La Parota in that state," said Jose Antonio Lizarraga, general manager of the CFE's southcentral region. The August vote by ejido dwellers in Guerrero state made the Nayarit option moot.

The Fox administration insists that La Parota, which will require an investment of US$800 million, will bring wide benefits to the region such as the creation of jobs during the construction phase of the project, expected to take five years to complete. In addition, funds will be available to build clinics, schools, bridges, and roads, said officials.

"The decision to go forward with the project is not a whim, but a necessity," said Agrarian Reform Secretary Florencio Salazar Adame. "The state of Guerrero, as well as the whole country, needs this hydroelectric facility to promote development and ensure that we have a sufficient supply of energy for industrial growth."

**Critics question viability of huge hydroelectric plants**

Environmental advocates contend that the displacement of local communities is only one reason to oppose La Parota. Environmental costs, they say, could be significant, especially because the facility
would require construction of a huge dam on the Papagayo River, about 30 km from Acapulco. "Looking at the bigger picture, it's worth recognizing that experts have long since advised the lending agencies that finance such projects that big electric dams are not sustainable," said Nauman. "Their life cycles are about 50 years and investment overruns almost always make their energy outputs more expensive than estimated, while they cause irreparable damage to the habitat."

Dam construction in the 20th century has caused the demise of half the world's wetlands and 20% of the endangered fish species in the world, said Nauman, citing studies from the International Rivers Network and the World Dam Commission. La Parota and El Cajon are the only new megaprojects currently in the works, but the CFE is planning to refurbish or expand several other facilities such as Infiernillo in Guerrero state, Villita in Michoacan state, and the Presa Fernando Hiriart Balderrama in Hidalgo state. All these plants were constructed to last at least 50 years, but will need periodic modernizations, said Humberto Marengo Mogollon, the CFE's projects coordinator.

The CFE is highlighting its efforts to implement a comprehensive energy policy, including a search for alternative methods to generate electrical power. In mid-August, the CFE awarded a US$111.4 million contract to Spain's Iberdrola SA and Mexico's Gamesa Corporacion Tecnologica SA to build a wind-driven power plant in southern Oaxaca.

The CFE said the 85-MW plant, La Venta II, should be operational by Nov. 1, 2006. The area is also supplied by La Venta, a wind-powered plant that began operating in 1994. "This plant will allow for diversification of energy sources through the use of clean energy that helps preserve the environment," the CFE said. [Sources: Impact of Hydroelectric Dams on Indigenous People, Chintecos, Otomies and Huicholes: A Case Study from Mexico (http://www.dams.org/); Unomasuno, 04/26/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 03/30/04, 08/16/05; Notimex, 08/15/05, 08/23/05; El Financiero, 04/05/04, 04/12/04, 08/16/05, 08/17/05, 08/24/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 08/16/05, 08/17/05, 08/24/05; La Jornada, 08/25/05, 08/26/05, 08/29/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 09/08/05]