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Mexico Involved in Debate Over Global Climate Change

by LADB Staff

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Mexico is at the forefront of the debate over global climate change, with emissions of greenhouse gases increasing significantly in that country since the 1990s. The Mexican government admits that the country has done little to control emissions of carbon dioxide, methane and other gases used in transportation, industry and agriculture, which many scientists say are responsible for atmospheric warming. In a report released on Sept. 1, the Instituto Nacional de Ecología (INE) released the results of a study indicating that emissions of these harmful substances in Mexico increased by 30% between 1990 and 2002.

The study, called the Inventario Nacional de Gases de Efecto Invernadero, said emissions of greenhouse gases during the 12-year period increased by an average of 2.2% annually. The INE said the energy sector, which includes the state-run oil company PEMEX and the government-affiliated Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE) was responsible for one-fourth of the gases. Transportation activities, particularly automobiles, were responsible for another 18% of the emissions, said the INE, which is a unit of the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT).

Discharges by private industry were responsible for another 16% of the emissions, while waste-disposal activities accounted for another 11%, said the study. Increases in carbon dioxide and methane posed the most serious problems for Mexico. "Among the challenges faced by the country is to find ways to reduce the use of fossil fuels for transportation," said the report. "We must begin to promote energy-efficient vehicles.

The INE recommended an increase in the use of hybrid vehicles for public and private transportation. "Hybrids generate about two tons of carbon dioxide per year, compared with three for a conventional compact car, seven for a Suburban sports utility vehicle and ten tons for a Hummer," said the INE. The INE's September report was a follow up to a similar report released in May of this year, which noted that Mexico ranks first in Latin America in fuel consumption, with usage estimated at 99.7 million tons per year.

According to the May report, almost all of Mexico is vulnerable to the effects of global climate change, with possible effects including the desertification of northern and central areas, a drop in agricultural production, a loss of biodiversity, water shortages, and flooding of coastal areas. "States like Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Tabasco, and Campeche have large areas that are susceptible to floods," said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada, quoting the INE report.

Global warming summit held in Monterrey

The concern over global climate change is increasingly becoming part of the agenda of Mexico's bilateral and multilateral meetings. In early October, Mexico hosted a meeting of 20 countries on global climate change in Monterrey. The meeting included energy and foreign ministers from the Group of Eight (G-8) industrialized nations and 12 other developing countries such as India, China, Brazil, and Mexico.

The gathering, which mostly took place behind closed doors, was attempting to gain a consensus among the countries on strategies to create a new framework to tackle climate change before the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. Mexico is one of 141 nations to endorse the Kyoto Protocol (see SourceMex, 2005-03-02). The protocol, which was signed in 1997, requires 36 industrial nations to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide, methane and other transportation, industrial and agricultural gases blamed by scientists for atmospheric warming.

Very few concrete proposals were presented to the public after the meeting other than a British plan urging developing countries to create more flexibility in their legal systems to allow private investment in clean energy. British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said Germany, Japan and Britain would be working closely with Mexico to finance and develop clean technologies. Spain and Mexico also announced a cooperation agreement, by which the Spanish government would invest up to US\$212 million in Mexican projects aimed at reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Arturo Gonzalo Aizpiri, director of Spain's efforts to combat pollution and climate change, said his country is committed to promoting development of clean energy. "Clean development is a strategic priority for Spain," Aizpiri said. Mexican Energy Secretary Jose Luis Luege agreed that European financing and technological assistance is needed to promote alternative energies. "For developing countries, this represents an opportunity...to facilitate investment," Luege said at the Monterrey meeting.

Despite the strong commitment by participants at the Monterrey summit to support the Kyoto agreement, environmental advocates urged G-8 and developing countries to take a more comprehensive approach to global climate change, including solutions that not only reduce emissions but take into account the needs of the world's more impoverished countries. "Public policies should be designed to reduce the vulnerability of developing countries," said Patricia Arendar, executive director of Greenpeace Mexico.

Arendar criticized participants at the meeting, particularly the G-8 countries, for proposing nuclear power as an alternative to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. Nuclear power plants create other types of problems, such the production of dangerous nuclear waste and safety concerns for communities near the facility.

Britain leads campaign to slow climate change

Britain used the gathering to issue a veiled criticism at the US for its refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol. The US, which generates about 25% of the gases that are linked to global warming, argues that signing the Kyoto Protocol could cost the US economy about 5 million jobs. "It is a myth that effective action on climate kills growth," Beckett said. "If we make the right choices, this will be an agenda of opportunity not of sacrifice." The US, however, contends that its decision not to sign the Kyoto Protocol does not mean that it is not doing its part to combat global climate change. "We know that this is a serious matter," Paula Dobriansky, the US State Department's undersecretary for democracy and global affairs, told the Mexico City daily business newspaper El Financiero. "We are committed to work on this issue in short, medium, and long term."

Dobriansky, who represented the US at the Monterrey summit, said US President George W. Bush's administration has spent US\$20 billion over the past five years to combat global climate change, including research on clean technologies. The Bush administration has also come under criticism at home for failing to take global warming more seriously. Chief among his critics is Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R-CA), who in late August bypassed the federal government and signed a cooperation agreement with British Prime Minister Tony Blair to combat global warming. Under the accord, California and Britain agreed to share research on cleaner-burning fuels and technologies.

California and Britain will also consider the possibility of setting up a system whereby polluters could buy and sell the right to emit greenhouse gases. The idea is to use market forces and market incentives to curb pollution. "This is an agreement to share ideas and information. It is not a treaty," said Schwarzenegger spokesman Adam Mendelsohn. "Right now, all we are doing is talking about sharing ideas."

Border governors to give issue priority in 2007

Schwarzenegger has been proactive in bringing the issue to other forums, including the Western Governors Association and the Border Governors Conference. While the issue has been discussed in working groups at the Border Governors conference, global climate change will become part of the official agenda when governors from the 10 states meet in Puerto Penasco, Sonora state, in 2007.

The California governor said the issue should be a priority for the border governors because the US-Mexico border region accounts for a large share of the pollution in North America. "Global warming is a real and serious problem, but if we act decisively and show great leadership, I think we can reverse the trend, reverse the damage that is already done," Schwarzenegger said at the conclusion of this year's meeting of border governors in Austin, Texas, on Aug. 24-25.

Schwarzenegger said he believes US and Mexican border governors have enough clout to collectively pressure their national leaders to adopt standards that would promote conservation and renewable energy. "If we band together on this issue and fight global warming, I think we can have an enormous impact," he said.

The decision of the border governors to make global climate change a part of their agenda in 2007 represents a victory for the California governor, who had been pushing since 2004 to give the issue a higher profile at the annual gathering of Mexican and US state executives. Among other things, Schwarzenegger is pushing the US and Mexican governors to adopt energy goals endorsed by the Western Governors Association, which include a commitment to improving energy efficiency in the region by 20% by the year 2020.

The California governor also hopes that standards adopted by his state can be applied to the country as a whole. In September, California adopted the first universal limit on industrial greenhouse emissions. The initiative places a cap on greenhouse gas emissions from power plants, oil and gas refineries, cement manufacturers and other industrial sources. This is part of a goal to reduce the state's emissions by 25% by 2020. (Sources: www.alkalizeforhealth.net/hybridcars.htm, Reforma, 09/01/06; Notimex, 10/02/06; Associated Press, 06/11/06, 08/01/06, 10/03/06; Reuters, 09/19/06,

10/03/06; La Jornada, 05/15/06, 10/04/06; The Herald-Mexico City, Excelsior, 10/04/06; El Universal,
Milenio Diario, 10/06/06; El Financiero, 10/04/06, 10/05/06, 10/09/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 10/09/06)

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