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LADB Staff

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Two Versions Of Mexico's Environmental Polices Emerge On World Environment Day

by LADB Staff

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Just as President Felipe Calderon is trying to present himself as a leader committed to reversing decades of ecological degradation in Mexico, a report by the environmental organization Greenpeace showed that the situation has deteriorated not improved during the current administration. The organization's Mexican affiliate Greenpeace Mexico released its damning report just days before representatives from dozens of countries were to participate in a World Environment Day commemoration in Quintana Roo state. The administration and environmental advocates agree that immediate action must be taken to address environmental degradation, which has left tens of thousands more Mexicans vulnerable to the effects of adverse climatic conditions.

President Calderon underscores commitment to protect environment

The UN Environment Program (UNEP) observes World Environment Day every year on June 5 by encouraging countries to organize events promoting environmental protection and sustainability. The UNEP also picks one country to host the global commemoration. This year, Mexico was selected to organize the event at Xcaret, a national park in Quintana Roo state that is oriented toward ecotourism. Among those attending were UNEP director Achim Steiner; Carter Roberts, president of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF); and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has gained a reputation as a champion of environmental protection not only in California but along the US-Mexico border region (SourceMex, August 27, 2008).

Calderon used World Environment Day to underscore his commitment to make environmental protection and the fight against global climate change top priorities of his administration. The president also used the occasion to reiterate his support for creating a global warming fund, with financial contributions from both rich and poor countries. The proposal could be addressed at a summit on global climate change, scheduled for Copenhagen in December. Accompanied by Environment Secretary Juan Elvira Quesada and other key Cabinet members, Calderon announced an initiative to reduce emissions that cause global warming by about 50 million tons a year. Calderon lauded private-sector participation in the effort to address environmental degradation and singled out Grupo Carso and its owner, billionaire Carlos Slim Helu. Slim has pledged US\$100 million over several years to assist in the government's efforts to maintain Mexico's biodiversity.

The president announced steps his administration would take toward reducing emissions, such as a program through which Mexican consumers would receive subsidies to change their old refrigerators and air conditioners for newer models that do not emit harmful gasses. Calderon emphasized the importance of "opening the environmental conscience in Mexico," which is lacking in many areas of the country. Steiner said his UN agency would support and challenge Mexico in its efforts to meet the small and large goals. "We propose that, in the medium term, Mexico substitute all its incandescent light bulbs for energy-saving alternatives," said the UNEP director. "It is not

going to be easy, and it will not come quickly, but we're going to attain this goal." Finance Secretary Agustin Carstens cited a study comparing the costs of inaction versus the benefits of taking steps to address the problem. The report, produced by the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) in cooperation with Mexico's Mario Molina Center and the World Bank, estimates that unchecked climate change might cost the Mexican economy 6% of GDP. Carstens said this translates to about US\$60 billion in damage to the Mexican economy. "Global climate change has a higher cost on our economy than the amount we would invest in measures to address this problem," Calderon said at the summit.

Recent studies have shown that Mexican agriculture is already experiencing negative effects from global climate change (SourceMex, August 01, 2007). The Calderon administration has taken some steps toward promoting environmental protection, such as moving to protect the country's wetlands, enforcing and strengthening anti-logging laws in the Monarch butterfly biosphere, and promoting wind energy in Oaxaca (SourceMex, February 14, 2007, February 13, 2008 and January 28, 2009).

Environmental groups say administration's efforts fall short

Environmental groups say the administration's past efforts and current commitments are a drop in the bucket considering the magnitude of the problem. Greenpeace was the most vocal organization at the World Environment Day summit, dressing up some of its activists as polar bears to dramatize the negative impact of global climate change on the polar caps. Oxfam Mexico used the occasion to protest the use of corn and other foodstuffs in Mexico, the US, and other countries to produce ethanol fuel. "This is a false solution in the fight to address climate change," said Raul Benet, a representative for the organization. The use of ethanol is seen as a major factor in a surge in food prices in Mexico and around the world during 2007 (SourceMex, January 10, 2007 and September 05, 2007).

Other organizations, such as the Centro Ecologista Akumal (CEA), based in Quintana Roo, criticized the president for not listening to the concerns of local environmental groups. "[Calderon] did not even set aside 20 minutes at the summit to talk to local environmental groups, which have many things to tell him about what is happening here in Quintana Roo," said CEA representative Raul Sanchez. Quintana Roo is one of the states in Mexico where tourism-infrastructure development is most intense, creating tensions between environmental groups on one side, and developers and state authorities on the other (SourceMex, February 14, 2007) and August 01, 2007).

Regarding the administration's pledge to cut emissions by 50 million tons, critics questioned whether this is sufficient. "Mexico produces around 623 million tons of carbon dioxide per year, and the reduction offered by President Calderon is only a reduction of about 8% of this contaminant," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. Patricia Arendar, executive director of Greenpeace Mexico, questioned the accuracy of administration statements that said environmental degradation has declined from 10% of GDP in 2003 to about 8.8% in 2006. She said the calculations, if made in Mexican pesos, indicate that environmental degradation has actually increased by almost 20% between 2003 and 2006. A document from Greenpeace Mexico released before the conference accused the government of inadequate and counterproductive environmental policies that "threatened the country's natural resources, favored the privileged populations, and ignored

the common patrimony." Greenpeace also faulted the Mexican Congress and state governments for ignoring the importance of environmental protection, saying government inaction would result in an "economic, social, political, and environmental catastrophe."

The document pointed to the increased vulnerability of Mexican communities, particularly in many rural areas. "Only a few years ago, authorities noted that 25 million Mexicans were threatened by climate change," said Greenpeace. "Today, 68% of the population or more than 70 million Mexicans are threatened by the changing climatic conditions." "We are not only talking about losses in terms of infrastructure or economic impact," said the document. "We are talking principally about loss of life." "There are no excuses. We have to protect the environment, independent of the country's situation," said Arendar, questioning an administration proposal to promote tourism at the cost of Mexico's ecosystems.

Other reports pointed to vulnerabilities in certain regions because of global climate change. For example, Pronatura Mexico warned about the possibility that the state of Veracruz could lose almost one-third of its land surface to flooding once ocean levels start to rise. "If the temperature of the ocean increases by just one degree, this would leave about 30% of Veracruz vulnerable," Pronatura director Martin Gutierrez Lacayo said in an interview with Mexico's official news agency Notimex. Gutierrez Lacayo said Tabasco and Chiapas states would also be extremely vulnerable, with residents having to endure floods much more severe than those experienced in 2007. Massive landslides accompanied the unprecedented floods, forcing major evacuations in the two states (SourceMex, November 07, 2007).

Pronatura said other coastal states like Yucatan, Quintana Roo, Tamaulipas, and Baja California were vulnerable to the impact of global climate change, including the possibility of severe hurricanes. The environmental organization said many coastal areas have become increasingly exposed because of the pro-development policies of successive governments, which have allowed the destruction of mangroves. "The government's efforts to push for tourism-related development without considering sustainability has damaged 90% of our country's mangroves, which are a natural barrier against hurricanes," said Gutierrez Lacayo.

Other experts are warning that Mexico should expect more frequent and more severe hurricanes, which would put about 40 million coastal residents at risk. In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper El Sol de Mexico, Agustin Brena Puyol, a researcher at the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM), said warming ocean water would increase the number of hurricanes in the Atlantic by about 10% in coming years. He said many of these hurricanes would have Category 4 or Category 5 strength, similar to Wilma, Emily, and Stan, which caused significant damage in Mexico in 2005 (SourceMex, October 12, 2005, November 02, 2005 and November 09, 2005).

Administration's forest policies questioned Mexico's policies regarding forest management have been a great source of controversy. The Calderon administration has gone to great lengths to publicize its reforestation programs, which are conducted in conjunction with the UNEP's Billion Tree Campaign. The UN agency lauded Mexico's participation in the program in its World Environment Day press release. "The country, with the support of its president and people, has spearheaded the pledging and planting of some 25% of the trees under the campaign," said UNEP.

"Accounting for around 1.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions, the country is demonstrating its commitment to climate change on several fronts." But the program is not the resounding success that the administration and UNEP are touting.

A report published this year by the Mexican Congress' congressional auditor uncovered severe deficiencies in the reforestation program, including planting cacti instead of trees and a lack of follow-up, which was causing many of the new seedlings to die (SourceMex, March 18, 2009). Greenpeace also criticized the administration's forest-related policies, which it said focus more on replanting trees rather than protecting existing resources. The organization said the area of sustainable forest in Mexico has declined to about 6.1 million hectares in 2007, compared with 8.6 million ha in 2000. "This is because the government's policies have favored reforestation over good-management practices," said the organization. Greenpeace pointed out that Mexico has the dubious distinction of ranking among the world's top-five countries both in biodiversity and deforestation. "We demand that the government of Felipe Calderon display more congruency," said Greenpeace. "It is not possible for Mexico to present itself as a model defender of the environment to the world while at the same time promoting the systematic destruction of ecosystems through policies that fail to halt deforestation."

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