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LADB Staff

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Experts Applaud President Felipe Calderon's Commitment To Renewable Energy

by LADB Staff

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from Houston, Texas LADB Staff Writer President Felipe Calderon has pledged to ensure that 26% of all electricity produced in Mexico will come from renewable sources by the end of his administration in 2012. The president revealed this goal at the Global Forum on Renewable Energy in Leon, Guanajuato state, in early October. Environmental advocates and energy experts who attended the XVI Border Energy Forum in Houston a week later applauded that commitment but said Calderon's promise was misleading. They noted that Mexico lacks the financial resources to make this pledge a reality. Furthermore, they said, Calderon was counting hydroelectric power, which has a mixed impact on the environment, as a renewable source.

Experts, in interviews with SourceMex, estimate that Mexico currently uses 2% to 4% from renewable sources, most of it from La Ventosa wind-powered facility in Oaxaca, whose first phase was inaugurated early this year (SourceMex, January 28, 2009). At present, energy produced in Mexico from sources other than carbon amounts to about 15% or 16% "If you consider hydroelectric power as renewable energy, then the percentage is high," said Arturo Pedraza Martinez, coordinator of programs for the Alianza para el Ahorro de Energia, the Mexico affiliate of the US Alliance to Save Energy. At the conference in Guanajuato, Calderon said Mexico has the potential to boost the percentage of electricity obtained from renewable energy other than hydroelectric power to more than 8% by 2012. If hydroelectric power is counted, then the percentage would rise to 26%.

Pedraza said Calderon is probably counting on the massive

El Cajon hydroelectric project in Jalisco and Nayarit states (SourceMex, January 24, 2007) to boost Mexico's total. "If you consider projects such as these, perhaps we could reach the goal, but it would be primarily because of hydroelectricity," said Pedraza. Still, hydroelectric energy has a mixed impact on the environment. Its advantage is that it relies on running water, which some consider a renewable source, and does not depend significantly on hydrocarbons to generate power. The disadvantage is that construction of dams and other hydroelectric facilities can cause major disruptions to the natural flow of rivers, damage local flora and fauna, and displace entire communities. There are also concerns that global fresh-water supplies are becoming more limited. "I think it should be an important part of the discussion whether we can consider hydroelectric power as a renewable energy source," said Isabel Studer, director of the business school at the Centro de Dialogo y Analisis sobre America del Norte at the Tecnologico de Monterrey, Mexico City campus.

Rigoberto Garcia, an energy researcher at the Instituto Nacional de Ecologia (INE), criticized Calderon for making promises that he cannot deliver. "He received some bad advice," the INE official said regarding Calderon's projections. Garcia pointed to the government's own energy blueprints in the next several years as evidence that there are no plans for sources other than

hydroelectricity. "In the projections for the Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE) through 2012, there are no major variations regarding participation of renewable energy," Garcia said. Studer said that, even if hydroelectric energy were part of the mix, Mexico would have to make significant investments to reach Calderon's goal of 26% by 2012. "It would require an impressive investment to reach those levels," she said.

The Tecnologico de Monterrey expert said, however, that it was important that Calderon was putting the issue of renewable energy on the table because, one way or another, Mexico would have to spend money to meet its future energy needs. "You have to consider that Mexico will have to make these types of investments in coming years or face the need to import petroleum," said Studer. "We have two options. Either we invest in exploration and production in deep waters, which is going to be extremely expensive, or we begin to spend money on renewables." Pedraza praised the president's initiative in promoting wind energy but said there were not enough projects beyond La Ventosa and another small facility in the works in San Fernando in Tamaulipas state.

Pedraza's assessment coincides with a recent report from two organizations involved in the effort, the Asociacion Mexicana de Energia (AME) and the Asociacion Mexicana de Energia Eolica (AMDEE), which said a lack of legal incentives has halted several private wind-energy projects around the country. These projects are worth about US\$6 billion, the two organizations said in early October. "We have to help push projects in La Rumorosa [in northern Mexico], Zacatecas, and Hidalgo, which are currently stuck," AME president Jaime de la Rosa told the Mexico City daily business newspaper *El Economista*. De la Rosa said Mexico is not taking full advantage of the Ley de Energias Renovables, passed as part of the energy reform last year to provide incentives for private investments in renewable energy. But Garcia said Mexico's potential for wind power is limited, since only a handful of locations have the proper conditions to harness this type of energy. These include Oaxaca, where La Ventosa is located, a couple of areas in central Mexico, and some coastal areas in Baja California, Veracruz, and Tamaulipas.

Garcia said he would like to see Mexico put more resources toward developing solar energy. "The 14 states that comprise northern Mexico form part of one of the regions in the world with most potential for solar energy," said the INE researcher. The INE researcher pointed out the solar-energy potential in Mexico is about 5 kilowatts per square meter, compared with 2.9 kw in some countries in Germany. "Yet, Germany uses solar energy to generate 12% of its electricity," said Garcia. "Imagine the potential we have in Mexico." Garcia acknowledged that solar energy requires large investments but said there are ways to promote less-expensive technology. "Investments do not have to go into photovoltaic systems," said Garcia. "We can invest in solar thermal projects, which are less costly." Calderon used the Leon conference to announce that Mexico had joined the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) and to reaffirm his commitment to fighting global climate change. One key solution, he told the 100 experts from 40 countries who attended the gathering, was to promote alternative energies, not only in countries like Mexico, but around the world.

Garcia said the decision to join IRENA was politically astute. "By taking this step, Mexico has put itself in a good political position ahead of the upcoming Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen," said Garcia. "Mexico will be able to tell the world, 'Come invest in our country. We

have a great potential." The conference is scheduled for Dec. 7-18. [The following sources were also used in this article: El Economista, 10/06/09; El Universal, 10/07/09; Excelsior, El Informador, Milenio.com, 10/08/09, El Sol de Mexico, 10/08/09, 10/09/09]

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