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Environment Takes Center Stage in Mexico Ahead of Major Conferences in November and December

by Carlos Navarro

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With some important environmental conferences scheduled in Mexico in November and December, the Chamber of Deputies moved to restore funding for anti-pollution and conservation programs that had been cut in early stages of deliberations for the 2011 expenditures budget (Presupuesto de Egresos). The proposed reductions had prompted strong protests from environmental advocates and some legislators, who had warned that the cuts would send a very bad signal to the global community as Mexico prepared to host the latest round of talks on global climate change in December and the World Mayors Summit on Climate (WMSC) in late November. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) offered direct and symbolic support to Mexico in early November by providing a loan of US\$400 million for the government to devote to regulatory initiatives to address climate change

Congress restores funds for climate-change measures in 2011 budget

The Congress engaged in the usual tug of war regarding funds during deliberations on the 2011 expenditures budget, but the proposal to reduce funding for expenditures for certain environmental programs, including air-quality monitoring stations and other anti-pollution measures, raised protests from legislators on environment committees and from environmental organizations. Under the proposal in the budget committee (Comisión de Presupuesto), the funding allocated for these programs would have been cut to about 700 million pesos (US\$56.5 million) in the 2011 budget compared with 1.35 billion pesos (US\$109 million) in 2010.

"The cuts angered members of the environment committee (Comisión de Medio Ambiente), who warned that the Chamber of Deputies would be sending a very bad signal just weeks before the start of the climate-change summit in Cancún," said the Mexico City daily newspaper .

Deputy César Daniel González Madrugá, who chairs the special committee on climate change (Comisión Especial sobre Cambio Climático), urged the Congress, and especially the budget committee, to heed the warnings from environmental organizations about global warming and its effect on Mexico.

In a press conference in Mexico City, González Madrugá told members of the budget committee that the desire to allocate funding for initiatives dealing with climate change cuts across party lines.

Some representatives of important environmental organizations were also at the press conference. Sandra Guzmán, an attorney for the Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA), urged legislators to support programs that promote energy efficiency across all economic and social sectors.

Guzmán also urged legislators to make a greater commitment to restoring Mexico's forest resources. "There should be greater investments in sustainable forestry," said the CEMDA attorney.

Jorge Villarreal, representing Fundación Heinrich Böll, said the Congress could make a huge difference in the effort to address the impact of climate change in Mexico by ensuring adequate funding for key programs. "Some 70% of Mexicans find themselves at risk because of climate change," said Villarreal, referring to such factors as drought, flooding, rising sea levels, and other effects of global warming. "That's why we require more funding."

After grueling deliberations, the budget committee increased the environmental budget. The full Chamber of Deputies approved an expenditures budget of 3.44 trillion pesos (US\$278 billion), of which 51.3 billion (US\$4.1 billion) will be devoted to the Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT). Deputies had some room to maneuver because the revenues budget they approved in October was about 60 billion pesos (US\$4.8 billion) higher than the amount President Felipe Calderón originally proposed in September ([SourceMex, Nov. 17, 2010](#)).

Inter-American Development Bank approves loan ahead of Cancún summit

Other funds for environmental protection will come from the IDB, which in early November announced that it had awarded a loan of US\$400 million to Mexico to devote to programs to address the impact of global climate change. Ellis Juan, the IDB's representative in Mexico, said the funds are intended primarily to provide financial support to SEMARNAT and state environmental agencies to strengthen anti-pollution enforcement measures. "This loan will support any programs that advance the regulatory framework at the federal and state level," Juan told reporters at a conference on environmental sustainability in Mexico City.

Approval of the IDB loan comes less than a month before the next phase of the Copenhagen negotiations on global climate change, which will be held in Cancún on Nov. 29-Dec. 10 ([SourceMex, Jan. 27, 2010](#)).

Calderón discussed his expectations for the summit during an address to fellow leaders from the Group of 20 (G-20) countries gathered in Seoul on Nov. 12.

The Mexican president said the meetings without a doubt will represent "a milestone" in the negotiations on climate change. He pledged that Mexico would do everything possible to ensure that the meeting produces results. "[These talks] will be an essential step toward achieving ambitious goals and will perhaps be the start of a process of greater collaboration and real action [on climate change]," said Calderón.

Some experts anticipate little or no progress from the Cancún summit, especially because the commitment from the US to take on global climate change has become more uncertain following the November 2010 congressional elections in which Republicans gained control of the US House of Representatives.

There was strong optimism following the 2008 presidential election that the US could move in a meaningful way toward an agreement with other countries on climate change. This was especially so after President Barack Obama spoke openly of saving a "planet in peril."

At the Copenhagen summit in December 2009, Obama said he wanted to reduce US emissions by 17% below 2005 levels by 2020. A Democratic-controlled House approved the plan, but the measure was not passed in the US Senate.

Now, some countries, especially members of the European Union (EU), are concerned that any efforts by Obama to reach a compromise on climate change could be blocked by a Republican-dominated Congress.

"We see the US disappearing as a partner in achieving meaningful climate action," Jos Delbeke, director general of the European Commission's climate team, told. "Cancún can still deliver, for example decisions on adaptation and deforestation, while progress should be made on the monitoring, reporting, and verification question, but beyond that, the outlook is worrying."

Mexico City to host mayoral conference on climate change

In addition to the all-important summit in Cancún, Mexico will have another major opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to addressing climate change. On Nov. 18-21, Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard will host a gathering of 3,000 municipal delegates and 1,000 mayors from 90 countries to look at climate change and other related issues. The gathering is convened by three organizations—the World Mayors Council on Climate Change (WMCCC), ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability, and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

Participants will address common problems, such as job creation, but the gathering will conclude with the WMSC on Nov. 21, which will focus solely on concerns about climate change and other issues related to the environment. Participants will have the opportunity to sign a voluntary Mexico City Pact, which intends to send a message to the international community about the strategic importance of cities in the struggle against climate change.

Key concerns that organizers will bring up during the summit are the consequences and risks to cities if sufficient actions are not taken by 2030. "If the temperature of the Earth increases by just 2 degrees, we could experience prolonged periods of drought, an increase in the number of hurricanes, and many other problems," Ebrard said two days before the start of the summit. "Coastal cities could be threatened by a rise in ocean levels."

Ebrard said Mexico City could face problems with flooding because the Mexican capital is located in a valley, in an area that once held a lake. "We are in an enclosed basin," said the mayor. "If suddenly we become inundated with more water than we can handle, this would create a huge risk for the city."

The agenda for the WMSC will include presentations from mayors from every region in the world, some of whom will be representing confederations like the US Conference of Mayors, the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), the Association of Large Cities in France, the Nigerian Mayors Alliance on Climate Change, and the Climate Negotiations Group of UCLG.

The Ebrard administration, which has been recognized for its environmental initiatives ([SourceMex, Dec. 16, 2009](#)), plans to lead by example by pledging to reduce carbon dioxide levels in the city by about 7 million tons during the next two years, said environment secretary Martha Delgado.

As part of the summit, the Mexico City government will set up a display in a public plaza with examples of new energy technologies designed to reduce costs and protect the environment.

The Ebrard administration, however, has not been free of controversy regarding its commitment to the environment. The Mexico City government's proposal to construct a major highway on the western edge of the capital has attracted protests from several neighborhood and environmental

organizations. The toll highway, known as the Supervia, would connect the metropolitan area with the southwestern districts of the capital. The Ebrard government has already expropriated land to build the 5-km highway, along with accompanying tunnels and bridges.

Critics argue that the project could overshadow other advances by the Ebrard administration to implement environmentally sustainable policies. "The Mexico City government should not deviate from the sustainable model to which it has committed," a group of consumer and environmental organizations said in a direct appeal to the mayor. "Projects such as the Supervia will contribute to global climate change because they encourage the use of the automobile."

Among the groups signing the appeal to the mayor were Alconsumidor, Bicitekas, Centro de Derechos Humanos Francisco de Vitoria, Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro, CEMDA, Centro Nacional de Comunicación Social, El Poder del Consumidor, Frente Amplio Opositor a la Supervia, Grupo de Estudios Ambientales, Organización de Litigio Estratégico en Derechos Humanos, and Mujer y Medio Ambiente.

The groups plan to express their opposition to the project during the mayors summit with a demonstration at the Plaza Santo Domingo, near the site of the gathering. "We hope our protest will spark discussion among summit participants about these types of urban projects, which are very harmful to cities," said organizers. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Nov. 17, 2010, reported at 12.38 pesos per US\$1.00]

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