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by Carlos Navarro

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The giant mining conglomerate Grupo México has been involved in its share of controversy through the years, including the fatal explosion at its Pasta de Conchos coal mine in Coahuila in 2006 (SourceMex, March 1, 2006, and Oct. 24, 2007) and the bitter and prolonged labor dispute with workers at its Cananea copper extraction facility in Sonora (SourceMex, Jan. 16, 2008, and June 16, 2010).

The latest controversy for Grupo México involved an environmental disaster caused by the company’s Mina Buenavista del Cobre operation, near the community of Cananea, in Sonora state. A storage tank on the site developed a leak and spilled more than 1.4 million cubic feet of sulfuric acid into the Bacanuchi and Sonora rivers. The presence of the chemical turned the rivers an orange color, forcing authorities to impose restrictions on water consumption in the nearby towns of Arizpe, Banámichi, San Felipe de Jesús, Aconchi, Baviácora, and Ures and the state capital of Hermosillo.

Authorities faulted Grupo México for not only failing to properly maintain the storage unit where the leak occurred but also failing to report the spill for 24 hours. The first report of the problem did not come from the company but from Banámichi mayor Lauro Escalante, who then notified Sonora’s civil protection agency (Unidad Estatal de Protección Civil) and the local office of the water commission (Comisión Nacional del Agua, CONAGUA), said the online news site Termómetro en línea.

Banámichi is about 140 km downriver from the site of the spill and about 180 km above Hermosillo.

Other local officials were angry that they were not notified of the problem for several days after the spill occurred on Wednesday, Aug. 6. "On Friday morning, the big area of chemicals that had been spilled the previous Wednesday surprised residents of Arizpe, whose town is near the area where the Río Bacanuchi unites with the Río Sonora," said Agencia de noticias Reforma. "Even though there was enough time to notify the communities downriver from the spill along the Río Sonora, no warnings were issued."

"No one sent us any alerts," Vidal Vásquez, mayor of Arizpe, told Agencia de noticias Reforma. "A commissioner in Arizpe called us on Friday morning to tell us that the [contaminated] water was coming. When the contamination arrived, we did not know what to do."

Each community took whatever measures it deemed prudent. Authorities in Arizpe, for example, stopped pumping water from the river. In Banámichi, city officials initially allowed residents to drink water from the tap, but warned against human contact with the river. The residents were also advised to keep their animals away from the water.

"In Baviácora, water distribution was suspended," said Agencia de noticias Reforma. "In other river communities like Huépac, which was celebrating its traditional feasts, the information was not
disseminated. And local municipal police sources offered assurances that the contaminated water did not reach the area." Even though Huépac is fairly close to the section of the river affected by the spill, the town was not one of the seven communities subject to restrictions.

Test finds high concentration of dangerous chemicals
CONAGUA immediately conducted a test of the water from the Bacanuchi and Sonora rivers and found heavy concentrations of aluminum, arsenic, magnesium, cadmium, iron, and other chemicals at unsafe levels for human consumption.

On Sunday, Aug. 10, CONAGUA ordered the suspension of water distribution to the seven communities because the water was too contaminated and posed a health threat to residents. The restriction was extended to Hermosillo, a city that has wrestled with water shortages (SourceMex, June 27, 2001, and Nov. 2, 2011). Hermosillo relies on El Molinito dam for part of its water supply, and authorities halted any distribution from that reservoir pending completion of the cleanup of the Sonora River.

"Even without the water from El Molinito dam, we are capable of supplying water to the city on a 24-hour basis, 365 days a year, via the Acueducto Independencia and local wells," said David Contreras Camou, a CONAGUA official with jurisdiction over the Sonora capital.

The environmental attorney general’s office (Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente, PROFEPÁ) and CONAGUA immediately ordered Grupo México to take actions to ensure "full remediation" for the spill, including neutralizing the sulfuric acid with lime, building dams to prevent further runoff and pumping out the contaminated water.

Mining company required to implement remediation plan
Lucas Antonio Oroz Ramos, a CONAGUA technical director, said Grupo México would have to conduct an comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the spill in the affected area, including El Molinito dam. As part of the evaluation, the company will be required to hire a company that specializes in these types of spills in order to present a complete evaluation.

Grupo México will also be required to implement a system to regularly monitor both the surface and subterranean water supplies for the next five years, said Oroz Ramos.

In addition, the company will have to provide complete information on any projects or developments in the area where the spill occurred.

PROFEPÁ expressed concern about the impact of the spill on flora and fauna in the area. Numerous fish and livestock deaths were reported in the area between Arizpe and Banámichi in the aftermath of the spill.

"Fortunately, this is the rainy season, so the cleanup of the basin should not take long," PROFEPÁ official Arturo Rodríguez said in a radio interview.

PROFEPÁ said punitive sanctions against Grupo México and Buenavista del Cobre are forthcoming, even though the spill was deemed accidental. "There have to be sanctions because this is what the law requires," said Rodríguez, who is in charge of industrial inspections for PROFEPÁ.