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Environmentalists Sound Alarm About Budget Plan to Eliminate Program to Protect Endangered Porpoise

by Carlos Navarro

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At the beginning of this year, the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) announced an all-out campaign to save the endangered vaquita, a species of porpoise, in the northern Gulf of California ([SourceMex, March 25, 2015](#)). Some environmentalists say, however, that the campaign might not be effective because of a lack of financial resources and the inability of the government to stop the illegal trade in a giant fish called the totoaba, which is in high demand in China and Japan. The gillnets used by fishers in Baja California often capture vaquitas, resulting in deaths of the endangered sea mammals.

The federal government's commitment to protect the vaquita came into question when President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration presented a budget proposal to Congress in September that cut expenditures by 221 billion pesos (US\$13 billion), including for some environmental programs. The administration's budget blueprint eliminated 13 SEMARNAT programs, including the plan to preserve the vaquita.

"There was optimism when President Peña Nieto first announced the program earlier this year, which would have resulted in the protection of 15 or 20 vaquitas over two years," said José Carmelo Zavala, president of the northeastern chapter of the Consejo Consultivo para el Desarrollo Sustentable (CCDS). "But that appears to have been a timid proposal, a trick that fooled the Mexican population and the members of the international community who are concerned about protecting of native species."

Zavala said the elimination of the program could represent a death sentence for the vaquitas. "It is extremely important to create continuity for the actions that were already started and the resources that were already allocated to the program," said the environmental advocate. "But announcing the program during the first half of the year and then announcing its elimination reflects poor planning and a lack of long-term vision."

Government insists vaquita protections still in place

Administration officials said, however, that the elimination of the program by no means signaled a reduced commitment by the Peña Nieto government to save the vaquita. Environment Secretary Rafael Pacchiano Alamán said the efforts to protect the vaquita are contained in other areas of the budget that was proposed for SEMARNAT this year. One of the key efforts, said Pacchiano Alamán, is to ensure that there are enough funds to compensate the fishing fleets, processors, and other businesses for potential lost income because of restrictions on where and how they can use their nets, even though fishing for the protected totoaba is illegal.

"The compensation costs about 525 million pesos (US\$31 million) per year, and we will have 100% of these resources to carry out this program," said the environment secretary. "President Peña Nieto has instructed that this scheme be kept in place for at least two years."

Pacchiano Alamán said the government would also make use of three drones to monitor the upper Gulf of California for fishing fleets attempting to catch totoabas in the protected vaquita habitat. "The benefit of these aircraft is that they allow us to monitor the refuge both during the day and at night," the environment secretary said in an interview with the daily newspaper *Excélsior*. "The drones are able to operate for 14 hours, which will allow us to be more efficient."

The drones are probably the same aircraft that the administration is using to catch turtle-egg poachers on the beaches of Oaxaca ([SourceMex, Sept. 2, 2015](#)).

Pacchiano Alamán also noted that SEMARNAT has allocated about 130 million pesos (US\$7.7 million) for the Secretaría de Marina (SEMAR) to acquire speedboats to help with the enforcement efforts.

Furthermore, said the secretary, Mexico is working closely with the Comité Internacional para la Recuperación de la Vaquita (CIRVA), which Mexico helped create in 1996, to obtain a more accurate count of the number of vaquitas that inhabit the protected area. This effort, he said, would help the government evaluate whether its strategy to protect the vaquita is working. CIRVA should have the results of the count available sometime in 2016, said Pacchiano Alamán.

Despite the reassurances from Pacchiano Alamán, environmental advocates like Greenpeace México are not convinced that the administration is doing everything in its power to save this endangered species. "The vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) is perhaps the marine mammal most under threat on the planet," biologist Miguel Rivas, a member of the organization's oceans campaign, wrote in the Blog de Greenpeace México.

The exact number of vaquitas is uncertain, but the latest estimate from Greenpeace México indicates that there could be 57 specimens in the habitat.

Rivas said the vaquita is one of 475 species in danger of extinction in Mexico. Others include the Mexican wolf and several species of sea turtles.

In addition to its listing in Mexico, the vaquita is also one of the species covered by the US Endangered Species Act and the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The IUCN listed the vaquita as Vulnerable in 1978, Endangered in 1990, and Critically Endangered in 1996.

"More than ever, it is urgent to agitate the waters to start a true revolution, to defend what belongs to us, and to claim our right to a healthy environment," Rivas wrote in a blog post published to coincide with Mexico's celebration of Independence Day on Sept. 16. "We have to protect the few vaquitas that remain in the wild. The conservation revolution is now, and it surely signals the future of our country."

In an earlier blog post in July, Rivas said a major problem was that the administration was not sticking to its commitment to enforce a crackdown on illegal fishing.

Greenpeace patrol discovers illegal gillnets

Rivas was part of a group of Mexican and international activists from Greenpeace who organized a series of expeditions in the vaquita habitat in July to determine whether the government was truly protecting the area against illegal fishing.

"During the course of nine hours, we discovered three gillnets in the ocean," said Silvia Díaz, coordinator of the oceans program at Greenpeace México. "Didn't authorities say they would deploy drones, speedboats, and personnel to the area to prevent illegal fishing in the vaquita habitat? The measures that [President Peña Nieto] announced are not being implemented. It appears that they do not understand the urgency of taking steps to prevent the disappearance of an entire species.

"None of the entities—the Secretaría de Marina (SEMAR), the Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente, and the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT)—are doing their job," added Díaz. "It is important that the federal government take care of its duties. At the same time, it is important to provide new opportunities and sustainable alternatives for the local fishing communities."

A major problem for the government and for environmentalists is the high demand in China for the totoaba. Buyers are willing to pay top dollar for the fish's swim bladder, which is dried and used to prepare soup. Some reports say the totoaba's swim bladder can fetch as much as US\$10,000 per kg in Baja California.

Government seeks international assistance

The Peña Nieto administration acknowledges that halting the illegal catch of the totoaba has become extremely difficult. In August of this year, Mexico requested assistance from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to help halt the practice.

In a request to members of CITES, the Mexican government asked them to confiscate shipments of totoaba coming from Mexico as well as share information about illegal trade of the fish and describe the threat to the vaquita. "Its main threat is the incidental catch by the illegal harvest of totoaba, which has led to a drastic fall of its wild population, which is thought to be less than 100 individuals," the Mexican government said in an earlier document filed with CITES.

The document also noted the threatened nature of the totoaba, which is endemic to Mexico. The government banned totoaba fishing 40 years ago. "Overexploitation of its wild populations, coupled by the degradation of its habitat, ultimately led to the establishment of a ban on its fisheries in 1975," said the Mexican government.

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