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Residents of Sonora Continue to Face Negative Repercussions from Toxic Spill in 2014

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Fifteen months after what the government described as one of the worst environmental disasters in recent Mexican history, many residents along the banks of the Sonora River and its tributary, the Bacanuchi River, are still struggling economically, and there is concern that their health might be compromised. The toxic spill from Grupo Mexico’s Mina Buenavista del Cobre operation, near the community of Cananea, in Sonora state, in August 2014, forced the government to declare an environmental emergency along a major section of the Sonora River stretching from Arizpe to the state capital of Hermosillo. The spill contaminated drinking and irrigation water for several communities along the two rivers (SourceMex, Aug. 13, 2014, and Sept. 24, 2014).

Authorities launched a major cleanup operation in the aftermath of the spill of a copper sulfate solution that introduced aluminum, manganese, arsenic and other heavy metals into the two waterways and into the soil along the banks of the rivers.

To pay for the cost of cleanup, economic compensation, and medical care, Mexico’s environmental ministry (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, SEMARNAT) created a special trust fund (Fideicomiso Río Sonora) of 2 billion pesos (US$106 million), financed with funds from Grupo México. Even with the large outlay of funds in the aftermath of the spill, Grupo México dodged a bullet, because the government did not force the company to shut down operations permanently or even for an extended period. “For Grupo México, the Buenavista del Cobre facility is one of its most productive and ambitious mining facilities,” said CNNExpansión, which noted that the company expects to boost copper output by 57% by 2017. Of that increase, more than one-third would come from the Buenavista del Cobre facility, said analyst Rodrigo Garcilazo of Grupo Bursátil Mexicano.

Grupo México acknowledged that it had not secured its storage site sufficiently, but also said the spill was “accidental” and caused by “excessive rain.” The environmental protection agency (Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente, PROFEPA) did not buy the company’s explanation, suggesting that there had been negligence on the part of Grupo México. The company was then fined 23 million pesos (US$1.2 million) after environmental authorities discovered 55 irregularities at the Buenavista del Cobre site. According to the nongovernmental organization PODER (Project on Organizing, Development, Education, and Research), which promotes accountability for corporations in Latin America, the company, among other things, had evaded the norms required for the handling of dangerous materials and had not conducted an evaluation of its emissions.

SEMARNAT also required Grupo México to conduct direct cleanup operations in five zones, but the company was slow in developing an adequate plan. “As recently as July [2015], Buenavista del Cobre had not submitted a comprehensive remediation plan that was approved by SEMARNAT,” PODER researcher Julieta Lamberti told CNNExpansión in December 2015.
‘Remediation’ process

This month, SEMARNAT announced that Grupo México had submitted and completed a comprehensive remediation plan involving the cleanup and cleansing of the river and the soil. “We informed them that we have accepted the remediation process they have taken,” said Rodolfo Lacy, deputy environment secretary for planning and policy. “The actions have been concluded.”

According to Lacy, the company had been able to demonstrate that it had developed and completed a viable scheme to test and remove contamination from the soil and applied dispersing agents in the water in the five zones that were affected by the spill. “The company has demonstrated that there are no longer threats to health, and therefore has completed the program of remediation,” the SEMARNAT official said.

The problem, some skeptics say, is that the cleanup efforts have been conducted on an area of about 30 kilometers (about 19 miles) from the actual spill. This includes only the land owned by Grupo México and not the adjacent areas.

Later, some government officials admitted that the affected areas had not been restored to pre-spill conditions. “We can’t say that it has been 100% remediated. The remediation plan is for five years,” said Adolfo García Morales, who served as the representative of the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) in Sonora before his appointment as state public safety secretary.

Still, SEMARNAT officials took the opportunity to make a big production of what they deemed as the completion of the cleanup phase of the areas affected by the spill. In a ceremony attended by recently installed Gov. Claudia Pavlovich Arellano on Feb. 5, Environment Secretary Rafael Pacchiano Alamán noted that the continuing efforts by the water commission, Comisión Nacional del Agua (CONAGUA), and the forestry commission, Comisión Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR), demonstrated the commitment of President Enrique Peña Nieto to the residents of Sonora affected by the spill. He pointed out that CONAGUA has certified that the water in the river is safe to drink and available in sufficient quantities.

Residents skeptical

Despite the administration’s guarantees and promises, residents and local experts remain deeply skeptical. According to Antonio Romo, an expert on chemicals at Universidad de Sonora, the federal guidelines are very lax regarding the content of metals that is allowed in water, which makes it easy for officials to declare that a water supply is clean.

Romo pointed out that despite heavy rain that diluted the chemicals in the water, “heavy metals can endure for thousands of years.”

“The lack of confidence over the purity of the soil and water used for irrigation and human consumption is an enduring concern among the inhabitants of the river basin, and the worries have expanded beyond the actual zone [of the spill],” said CNNExpansión.

“We are very concerned because we do not truly know whether the water is good,” said Enrique Valencia, an agricultural producer in Arizpe, one of the affected communities.

The mistrust of the water purity is the latest problem for area residents, who were forced to refrain from using wells located 500 meters from the Sonora River. This left more than 23,000 residents...
without direct access to river water. In addition, farmers were unable to irrigate thousands of hectares of peanuts, garlic, chile peppers, corn, sorghum and other crops.

“When I most needed the water, we were denied access,” said Adolfo López, a farmer in Banámichi, who lost 15 ha. of peanuts and 7 ha. of sorghum.

Other area residents are facing a different type of economic hardship—they are unable to sell their goods. Supermarkets nationwide have stopped buying cheese from Andrés Martínez simply because his company, Quesos Don Andrés, is located in the community of Ures, Sonora, near the area of the spill. Consumers and retailers are hesitant to buy any dairy products from the area because there is no guarantee that the water that the cows drink is free of contaminants. “I continue to produce cheese, but I struggle to place my product in stores,” Martínez said.

Martínez has found some buyers for his cheese, but now only produces about 80 kg. daily, compared with his prior output of 600 kg. per day before the spill.

Some farmers complain that the compensation they have received via Fideicomiso Río Sonora has been insufficient to cover the actual economic damage caused by the spill. For example, Adolfo López noted that the 100,000 pesos (US$5,230) that he received from the fund does not even cover the cost of planting 5 ha., which would be one third of his normal planting. He was able to piece together other funding this year to plant a total of 9 ha.

Similarly, Armando Enríquez said he received about 132,000 pesos from the government (US$7,000) to cover the loss of his crops. The problem is that the losses were four times higher than what the government provided.

A common problem with the Fideicomiso Río Sonora is the lack of equity in disbursing compensation to area residents. While Adolfo López received 100,000 pesos for his peanut fields, fellow Ures resident Ramón Bravo, who makes a living selling pastries, said he was given 350,000 pesos (US$18,000). “I have no idea how they determined the formula,” Bravo said.

Another complaint with the fund is that a large share of the money, about 24 million pesos (US$1.2 million) was spent on publicity and promotion.

Health problems linger

Health problems are a major concern for those who live near the banks of the Sonora and Bacanuchi. As of late 2015, the government had screened more than 10,000 residents and identified more than 300 people with illnesses tied directly to contamination from heavy metals. Manganese, for example, can have serious impact on the nervous system if an individual is exposed over prolonged periods of time, according to Hector Duarte Tagles, an environmental health specialist at Universidad de Sonora.

Even though the government immediately sent mobile teams of doctors into communities to identify affected families, many residents did not receive a medical consultation for several months. Furthermore, doctors were not able to visit with every family.

“Researchers and environmental experts in Mexico are now warning that the government’s slow response, combined with outdated water quality standards, have placed the population under unnecessary risk,” said the Arizona Daily Star.
Another problem is that the negative health effects were not initially detected. “After the spill, many people went to their health centers and it wasn’t possible to detect them,” said Joel López Villagómez, the director of a temporary treatment center that opened in March 2015.

Duarte Tagles added that the risk increases if people begin their treatment late. “The longer some contaminants are in the organism, the more difficult it is to get rid of them,” he said.

The health problems could extend to a more populated area, as the Sonora River supplies water for the state capital of Hermosillo via the El Molinito reservoir.

According to other studies conducted by Universidad de Sonora, the contamination of heavy metals has reached Hermosillo. “Authorities would be irresponsible if they do not conduct an in-depth study of the waters that supply the city,” consumer and environmental activist Rosa María O’Leary told the online news site La Silla Rota. “They have been discrediting the studies from universities and are hiding the true results in order not to harm the mining company. They are not interested in the welfare of the people; only in the interests of [Grupo México CEO] Germán Larrea.”