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Guatemala Environment Briefs: River Protection, Oil Spill, Debt Swap Request

by LADB Staff

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US lumber firm forbidden to transport products on Rio Dulce

On May 20, Guatemala's Comision Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP) rejected a request by the US timber company Simpson Forestry to transport lumber for export on the Rio Dulce. The firm's request had generated a public uproar in Guatemala because the Rio Dulce forms part of the Lake Izabal national reserve, which is protected by law from industrial activities that could harm the region's sensitive biodiversity. Since 1988, Simpson Forestry has planted some 13,000 "arborea Gmelina" trees that are used for high-quality paper on the shores of the Rio Dulce. Now that many of the trees are mature and ready for export, the company had applied for a license to use the river to transport its product to Puerto Barrios on the Atlantic Coast (see NotiCen, 03/06/97). CONAP cited three basic concerns to justify its ruling.

First, the water turbulence created by high-powered propellers would likely damage the river's flora and fauna. Second, the constant passage of barges would eventually dredge the river, doing irreparable damage. Third, the risk of an accident would be constant. CONAP also feared that awarding Simpson Forestry a license would encourage a flood of similar requests by other companies. "CONAP is determined to prohibit the use of the Rio Dulce waterway for large-scale commercial or industrial transport," said CONAP executive secretary Rodolfo Cardona. "We know that many other companies have been awaiting our ruling on this case to decide whether to submit their own applications."

Simpson Forestry executives claim that CONAP's ruling will force it to close down its Guatemala operations, since transporting its product by truck to the coast would be far too expensive, placing the firm at a competitive disadvantage on the world market. "CONAP's decision will force us to leave Guatemala," warned Lance Ayrault, the firm's executive director, who said his company will appeal the ruling. "The decision sets a very bad precedent for foreign investors. It could discourage other firms from doing business in Guatemala."

National environmental and academic groups, however, who lobbied heavily against Simpson Forestry's request, said the firm's departure could be good for the country. "Simpson Forestry's withdrawal will have a positive impact," said Rene Poitevin, director of the Guatemalan branch of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO). "It shows that our country has firm environmental criteria and established policies that we are willing to uphold. That, in turn, provides investors with clear rules and a transparent legal framework."

Moreover, government plans to develop the Rio Dulce and the Izabal reserve as a magnet for ecotourism are expected to more than offset the loss of jobs caused by the departure of Simpson

Forestry, which employs 600 people. Currently, some 12,000 people earn a living from tourism-related activities in Izabal, and the government is now evaluating environmental-impact studies submitted by four hotel chains interested in setting up operations along the Rio Dulce. If licenses are granted, those firms are expected to invest about US\$30 million, creating some 8,000 jobs.

Large oil spill reported in Lake Atitlan

In mid-May, local authorities in Panajachel, a resort on the shores of Lake Atitlan, reported that a hotel on the banks of the lake dumped some 220 gallons of oil into the water. According to the Comision Nacional del Medio Ambiente (CONAMA), which is investigating the damage from the spill, an estimated 7.7 million gallons of lake water were contaminated, given that, for every gallon of oil spilled, an average of 35,000 gallons of water are polluted.

Lake Atitlan, located in the center of the country, is the second-largest fresh-water reservoir in Guatemala. It is one of the country's central tourist attractions, and it provides an important source of livelihood for the numerous Indian communities who live along the shores of the lake. According to Aura Marina Otzoy, a legislative deputy and head of the congressional Comision del Medio Ambiente, the CONAMA investigation may lead to criminal charges against the hotel owners and managers. Allegedly, the hotel management allowed the oil to flow from its drain pipes into the lake for more than a day, even after hotel personnel had reported that petroleum was oozing from the building's draining system.

Moreover, it is the second time in ten years that the same hotel has been responsible for spilling oil into the lake. Meanwhile, local authorities in Panajachel hope to use the attention caused by the oil spill to increase public awareness about other environmental hazards. "We need more resources to educate people on how to care for the lake, because local communities indiscriminately dump their sewage into the water," said Enrique Rodriguez, mayor of Panajachel. "In addition, the motorboats that use the lake constantly change their oil in the water, regularly unloading many gallons of fuel into the reservoir. We need to set up a naval patrol to guard against environmental degradation."

Guatemala asks US to swap debt for environmental protection

During US President Bill Clinton's recent visit to Central America (see NotiCen, 05/15/97), the heads of CONAP and CONAMA met with US Agency for International Development (USAID) directors and other US officials to discuss Guatemala's request that the US pardon US\$10 million in bilateral debt to finance environmental-protection programs.

According to CONAP and CONAMA spokespersons, USAID officials were extremely receptive, encouraging those organizations to present a formal proposal, which they plan to do in June. If approved, Guatemala would use the funds to reinforce government institutions that were set up to protect the environment, especially CONAP and the newly formed Fondo Guatemalteco del Medio Ambiente (FOGUAMA). FOGUAMA, created at the end of 1996, provides financing and technical assistance for reforestation projects and for waste-treatment and disposal programs around the country. The money would also be channelled into government efforts to create protected zones and to set up security forces to guard national reserves. Currently, the government is seeking legislative approval for 32 new protected areas, which, if passed, would mean that 22% of national territory would be environmentally protected by law. Through the debt-pardon proposal, the government hopes to take advantage of the US's growing interest in environmental programs in

Central America, which President Clinton and his Cabinet members stressed during their visit to the region.

In fact, in late April, the US State Department announced plans to open offices in 12 countries to tackle regional environmental problems as part of a new "green" slant to US foreign policy. The Central America office will be opened at the US Embassy in Costa Rica later this year. The office, known as a "regional environmental hub," will focus on five specific problems: climate change, toxic chemicals, species extinction, deforestation, and marine degradation.

Meanwhile, on Earth Day April 22, USAID made a US\$2.15 million donation to CONAP to strengthen government efforts to protect the Maya Biosphere Reserve, located in the far- northern El Peten department. The Maya Biosphere is generally considered the largest and most important environmentally protected area in Central America. Land conflicts intensify Since April, land conflicts have grown markedly throughout Guatemala, leading in some cases to violent clashes between squatter groups and government security forces.

During the first four months of the year, tensions steadily mounted throughout the Guatemalan countryside, as police initiated efforts to evict campesino families from private farms that they had occupied since 1995, when a wave of land invasions gripped the country (see NotiSur , 02/29/96). The police evictions, in turn, have inspired campesino organizations to reinstate squatter movements in many areas, particularly in El Peten department (see NotiCen, 04/17/97).

Since April, the government has managed to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflicts in El Peten, where the umbrella group Unidad Campesina de Peten (UCP) agreed to halt its invasion of farms after the government delegated a high- level commission to resolve their demands. The conflicts had captured public attention because most of the squatter settlements were set up in the Maya Biosphere and other protected zones. The government has agreed to redistribute about 20,000 manzanas (one manzana=.692 ha) of state lands in El Peten, and it will buy more farms in that department from private owners.

The government expects to grant 25-30 manzanas to each of the estimated 1,500 squatter families (about 7,500 people) who are now camped in the national parks or on private lands. Nevertheless, small- and large-scale land invasions have gained momentum in many other areas since April, particularly in the departments of Izabal, Alta and Baja Verapaz, Escuintla, Solola, Huehuetenango, and San Marcos. The largest and potentially most conflictive invasions have taken place in the far-western department of San Marcos, which borders Mexico. On May 25, for example, some 400 families (about 2,000 people) led an invasion of the San Luis coffee estate in the municipality of Malacatan. The campesinos led by the Asociacion Campesina de Desarrollo Integral and the Comite de Unidad Campesina (CUC) say that that farm was granted to them under the agrarian reform of ex-president Jacobo Arbenz (1950- 1954). The squatters held farm managers hostage for four days, and they now threaten to burn down the farm installations if police try to evict them.

In other incidents in San Marcos, 600 security personnel led a raid on May 15 against squatter groups camped on two farms in the municipality of El Tumbador. The squatters have occupied those farms since 1995, and an attempt to evict them in April 1996 led to a violent clash in which the head

of the government's Fuerza de Reaccion Inmediata (FRI) was killed (see NotiSur, 05/02/97). Given the huge police contingent that arrived, the squatters agreed to peacefully leave the two farms. But three days later they returned, and when the police came back to evict them again, heavy gunfire from the squatter settlement forced them to retreat. [Sources: New York Times, 04/23/97, 05/10/97; Siglo Veintiuno (Guatemala), 04/14/97, 05/11/97, 05/13-16/97; Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 03/09/97, 03/10/97, 03/12/97, 04/20/97, 04/22/97, 04/23/97, 04/28/97, 05/04/97, 05/06/97, 05/07/97, 05/14/97, 05/16/97, 05/18-21/97, 05/27-29/97, 06/01/97, 06/02/97]

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