

Agency to probe industrial waste site in Tijuana

By JOE CANTLUPE
Copley News Service

May 18, 2000

WASHINGTON -- An environmental monitoring agency created by NAFTA said yesterday that it would investigate the circumstances surrounding a long-abandoned pile of industrial waste threatening an impoverished Tijuana neighborhood.

The decision was hailed by representatives of the San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition, which filed a petition 18 months ago asking the agency to probe the site. It has been littered the past six years with 6,600 metric tons of battery acid and other waste within a few hundred yards of Colonia Chilpancingo.

The NAFTA-created agency, the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, voted unanimously to investigate the former Metales y Derivados lead smelting plant, described by environmentalists as one of the worst hazardous waste sites along the California-Mexico border.

The commission, based in Montreal, includes representatives of the United States, Mexico and Canada. Although the agency lacks formal enforcement powers, environmentalists have looked to the commission to monitor compliance with environmental regulations along the northern and southern borders of the United States.

Last month, environmental groups from the three nations criticized the Montreal commission's record, citing its failure to act on the Tijuana petition as well as nearly a dozen others. Critics said the agency appeared to undermine the spirit of the North American Free Trade Agreement to maintain adequate environmental safeguards.

Yesterday, San Diego environmentalists and community residents said they were pleased with the Montreal agency's surprise decision, coming days after a Copley News Service report about the Tijuana waste site was published in The San Diego Union-Tribune.

"Mexico, the United States and Canada have finally recognized that this problem poses significant risks, but this action falls short of a total victory," said Cesar Luna, a lawyer and representative of the San Diego Environmental Health Coalition. Luna said residents want the waste removed from the Tijuana site.

"While this is a step in the right direction, our community is not any healthier or any cleaner," said Maurilio Sanchez, president of an environmental group in Tijuana that assisted the San Diego coalition in the petition. "No community should ever have to endure the environmental health hazards and government inaction Colonia Chilpancingo has had to put up with for nearly a

decade."

Officials of the Montreal agency declined comment.

But the Montreal agency approved a resolution saying it will prepare a "factual record" to determine whether Mexico "is failing to effectively enforce its environmental law" at the Tijuana site.

Officials of Mexican environmental agencies have told residents they are talking with its former owner about covering the cost of cleaning up the site. The former owner avoided arrest warrants by moving to the United States, according to officials.

Representatives of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also have visited the site and are monitoring the situation.

Copyright 2000 UNION-TRIBUNE PUBLISHING COMPANY