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News

U.S.-Mexico Border

Mexico Provides Final Funding for Cleanup Of Abandoned Lead Smelting Site in Tijuana

LOS ANGELES—Mexican Environmental Secretary Rafael Elvira Quesada signed Aug. 15 a document appropriating approximately \$900,000 for the final stage of cleanup at the abandoned Metales y Derivados lead smelting site in Tijuana, Mexico.

The ceremony turning over federal funds to the state of Baja California took place in Tijuana, according to Amelia Simpson, director of the Border Environmental Justice Campaign, Environmental Health Coalition.

Together with its cross-border partner, Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental, the Environmental Health Coalition has been a primary advocate for the abandoned site's remediation.

"We are proud that the Metales y Derivados Working Group was successful at building a respectful and honest working relationship to achieve this historic cleanup," said Magdalena Cerda, also of the Environmental Health Coalition.

The working group includes members from the two aforementioned nongovernmental organizations and officials from state and federal governments in both countries.

The Metales y Derivados (Metals and Derivatives) site was closed by the Mexican government for violation of federal environmental laws.

Individuals from the adjacent Chilpancingo neighborhood petitioned the Commission on Environmental Cooperation, a product of the North American Free Trade Agreement's environmental side accord, alleging that Mexico was not enforcing its General Law on Ecological Balance and Environmental Protection.

Jose Kahn, the site's owner, fled Mexico when a 1994 warrant for his arrest was issued. The commission determined the site, which held 7,000 metric tons of lead slag, to be a human health hazard in 2002 (29 DEN A-8, 2/12/02).

The Mexican environmental agency SEMARNAT (Secretariat for Environment and Natural Resources), under prior Secretary Alberto Cardenas, signed an agreement in 2004 with the groups establishing a four-stage cleanup to be carried out over a five-year period.

Cleanup Expected to be Completed in December

Simpson told BNA Aug. 16 that the final cleanup should be completed in December, one year ahead of schedule. Approximately \$750,000 has been spent thus far to remove some 2,000 tons of toxics from the site.

She said the remaining contamination will remain on site, mixed with concrete and contained in a lined cell.

The nongovernmental groups wanted all of the contamination removed. As a compromise, Simpson said they accepted \$20,000 from the Commission on Environmental Cooperation to handle community oversight and monitoring of the final cleanup stage.

Simpson said, "Although today we're celebrating a landmark cleanup project, we're very concerned about the free trade agreements that the United States is promoting with Peru, Panama, Colombia, and South Korea, which include the same NAFTA mechanism that, as we know from our experience with Metales y Derivado, doesn't work for communities seeking to defend themselves from polluting industries." ❏

By Stephen Siciliano

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