

Discovery of Radioactive Scrap near Border Begg Proper Burial

By Talli Nauman | August 5, 2005

Lurking in the dunes along the highway just 50 kilometers south of the U.S.-Mexico border city area of El Paso - Ciudad Juárez are heaps of uncontained radioactive waste. The secret in the desert sands recently was revealed by Mexican nuclear physicist Bernardo Salas Mar, a former employee of the federal atomic power plant in Veracruz state who was fired after publicly disclosing its radioactive contamination of the Gulf of Mexico.

Salas, now a professor at the Mexican National Autonomous University (UNAM), investigated the border public health threat in cooperation with the rural residents of the municipality of Samalayuca, adjacent to Ciudad Juárez, in the northern state of Chihuahua. His field research turned up four mounds of metal scraps, each about six cubic meters in size, exposed to wind and water. The radiological inspection determined that the risk of radiation contamination in the human food chain from this abandoned site warranted protective measures.

Salas, not an anti-nuclear activist but a proponent of safe use of nuclear technology, recommended such drastic measures as burial of the waste and a fence around it. *The Sociedad Española de Protección Radiológica* (Radiological Protection Society of Spain) has invited him to present his findings at its upcoming tenth national congress.

But like so many other prophets in their own lands, Salas encountered colleagues' unwillingness to admit the results of his work in Mexico. Three domestic institutions similar to the one in Spain refused to accept his conclusions at their congresses.

The Sociedad Mexicana de Seguridad Radiológica and the *Sociedad Nuclear Mexicana*, told him the rejection was because he hadn't sought permission to enter the abandoned lot where the waste is located. *The Sociedad Mexicana de Física* would not answer his written request for its reasons.

The location is on top of the burial grounds of other waste from what Chihuahua journalist Ignacio Alvarado Álvarez calls the worst nuclear disaster of this hemisphere, "Our Chernobyl." That is the fiasco that began 21 years ago in 1984 when guards at Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratories near Santa Fe, New Mexico, detected a

truckload of rebar from Old Mexico contaminated by radioactive Cobalt-60.

It is a twisted tale typical of the bi-national boundary line's environmental predicament. A U.S. gamma radiation chamber sent illegally to Mexico was scrapped in Ciudad Juarez with other metal, which it contaminated. The contaminated metal was made into the rebar and shipped for sale in the United States. Only then was it discovered to be dangerously radioactive, and it was returned to Mexico for confinement.

The defunct state-run *Aceros de Chihuahua* foundry made the rebar by recycling material obtained at the *Yonke Fenix*. The Ciudad Juarez junkyard is now famous because among the objects it received for resale was the gamma radiation chamber with pellets of Cobalt-60 that the most expensive private hospital in the city had acquired as contraband from a U.S. supplier.

U.S. importers of the resulting rebar were located. The rebar in the United States was carted back to Mexico for burial. But south of the border many shipments of recycled metal that different foundries made with the contaminated scrap from the Fenix junkyard were delivered and never recovered for interment.

Perhaps the waste mounds that Salas verified are a miniscule part of what somehow was picked up around the country.

Meanwhile, the radioactive construction material remains in at least half the states in Mexico. Millions of people are being exposed to the elevated radiation from the rebar in more than 17,000 shopping centers and public buildings, according to conservative estimates. The harm, in terms of cancer and mutations, to this and future generations is incalculable.



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As the world reflects on the tragedy of radiation damage from the atomic bomb explosions' destruction in Hiroshima and Nagasaki 60 years ago during the first week of August, the less obvious calamity of the Cobalt-60 contamination in Mexico also continues.

The least society can do is admit to the mounds at Samalayuca and procure a proper burial at the site.

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