

Time for Pollutant Disclosure in Mexico

By Talli Nauman | May 31, 2006

Mexico moved upstage on the international scene this month with representation in Geneva of its non-governmental organizations at the meeting of the Working Group on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTRs).

In this event to boost public access to environmental information on May 17-19, the United States and Canada also apparently moved up in the pecking order. The meeting marked the first time they achieved participation in the delegation of the European Eco Forum, which was the coordinator of civil society groups there.

PRTRs are the government inventories for which private industrial sites are required to disclose annual discharges of toxic waste to air, water, and land, so citizens can exercise the right to know what pollutants are in their communities. The United States and Canada have these mandatory, public registers, as do many other nations. But Mexico has been dragging its feet for ten years on its international commitments to instate them.

Assuring that all jurisdictions have comparable reporting of this data is of tantamount importance in the process of globalization, because it levels the playing field, not only for industries in competition for profit, but also for constituents to have equal access to information. PRTRs are a cornerstone of fair trade and environmental justice that are currently being placed in the foundations of global cooperation.

The month of May has been a momentous one for PRTRs around the world. In Geneva, the working group, meeting under the auspices of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), arrived at language for the first legally binding agreement to create a cross-boundary register with comparable national parameters. The Commission announced to delegates from Europe, Russia, and points in between that Mexico is poised to become the first nation in the developing world with a PRTR. Meanwhile, activists in the United States repelled the EPA's attack on the U.S. register, thanks to a concerted national lobby that achieved an amendment in the lower house of Congress forbidding the administration to use money from the Interior appropriations bill for reducing reporting requirements.

In a nationwide telephone conference of some 50 representatives of organizations advocating community right to know in the United States, strategists discussed and noted for the record the fact that federal officials should be apprised that the U.S. register, with more than 600 hazardous substances, is a touchstone to upholding multi-lateral obligations. Its erosion would send a counter-productive message to Mexico and other countries in the process of setting up national or cross-border inventories.

In Europe, delegates were surprised that the EPA was even considering a rollback, especially one that would allow polluters to emit ten times more without informing the public. Of course, in the United States, citizens are surprised that Mexico doesn't have a pollutant register at all.

After lagging behind its free-trade partners in Europe and North America for so long, it would be another surprise if Mexico lived up to its promise to publish the preliminary results of its first round of industry accounting by the end of June, in an exercise that would set the tone for full-blown reporting in the future. But UN officials are excited about this possibility. So are representatives of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation established by the North American Free Trade Agreement.

If only the Mexican government and business associations could catch the fever. One day, people would know what's getting into the air they breathe, the food they eat, and the water they drink. One day, struggling industries could save money on water, energy, and recycling, just by finding cost-efficient measures made obvious by reporting. This would not only benefit the Mexican population, but also Mexico's neighbors, who share ecosystems, air basins, watersheds, and corporate partnerships.

These are crucial times for the Mexican PRTR. It would be well for everyone to keep an eye out for opportunities to express to officials and corporate representatives the



importance of implementing the register and the commitment to constantly improving it. The effort must transcend elections and changes of administration. Health and economic development depend on it.

Talli Nauman is a founder and co-director of Journalism to Raise Environmental Awareness, a project initiated with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. (talli@hughes.net) This article was originally published in The Herald-Mexico.

Published by the Americas Program of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

The Americas Program

“A New World of Citizen Action, Analysis, and Policy Options”

Founded in 1979, the IRC is a nonprofit policy studies center whose overarching goal is to help forge a new global affairs agenda for the U.S. government and people—one that makes the United States a more responsible global leader and partner. For more information, visit www.americaspolicy.org or email americas@irc-online.org.

Recommended citation:

Talli Nauman, “Time for Pollutant Disclosure in Mexico,” IRC Americas Program (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, May 31, 2006).

Web location:

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3295>

Production Information:

Writer: Talli Nauman
Editor: Laura Carlsen, IRC
Layout: Nick Henry, IRC