

# U.S.-Mexico Meeting on the Border Environment

AMERICAS PROGRAM, INTERHEMISPHERIC RESOURCE CENTER (IRC)

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As governments cross continental borders seeking trade agreements and huge integration projects, citizens' responses have also become international. Recent grassroots organizing on the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP) have brought together activists from different countries and different issues to form common fronts.

The Meeting on the Border Environment, first held in 1998, has been a pioneer experience in international organizing on shared issues. Founders conceived it partly as a venue to deal with problems caused by the North American Free Trade Agreement

## CHALLENGES MET BY THE MEETING

- ✘ Personal contact provides motivation for environmental action.
- ✘ Sharing knowledge helps identify a common agenda for diverse groups.
- ✘ The latest updates on individual issues are presented by the stakeholders most involved in them.
- ✘ Skills and capacity building get a boost.
- ✘ Examples of successful campaigns spur others.
- ✘ Participation in and integration of the cross-border environmental movement increases.
- ✘ The forum is a place for raising new issues and tackling old ones in new ways.
- ✘ Organizers get chances to compare experiences and debate organizing approaches.
- ✘ Peer recognition helps overcome alienation.
- ✘ Moral support gives encouragement.
- ✘ Bridges to cross-border understanding are constructed.
- ✘ Communication among different shareholder sectors is promoted.
- ✘ Concrete initiatives can be supported by many actors gathered in one place.



At the sessions and exhibits, participants share expertise, inform on the latest details of cases, and provide updates on issues.

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(NAFTA) in the U.S.-Mexican boundary area, and participants quickly understood that top-down integration required a response from the ground up. The meeting originally sought to fill the demand for a border-wide event at a time when most workshops and conferences on U.S.-Mexico environmental issues were topic-specific, geographically limited, government-sponsored, or small, invitation-only affairs that targeted policymaking and academic audiences.

Today, after being held four times, the border meeting has become a unique fixture of binational organizing that brings together activists from non-governmental groups (NGOs) on both sides of the border, providing an important impulse for con-

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This year more than 400 people took part in the Meeting on the Border Environment.

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structive change and sustainable development in the threatened ecosystems that transcend the political demarcations of the two countries

This year, over 400 people took part in the meeting, held May 15-17 in Tijuana, Baja California, including representatives of 90 nonprofit organizations, 40 universities, various indigenous and community groups, corporations, and government. Thus, the forum has established its name as arguably the largest environmental event in Mexico.

### **Fostering Face-to-Face Cross-Border Activism**

The personal contact the meeting affords is motivating. “This is my first time here, and I wish I’d come before,” commented Carla Sbert, a representative of the Montreal-based Commission for Environmental Cooperation, a trilateral agency set up by a side accord to NAFTA. “It’s a place where people doing real work with very real problems get together to make the most of their experiences, share information, use links, and develop coalitions and networks.”

The programming of panels, project circles, round tables, and workshops on a spectrum of environmental issues allows participants to develop a common agenda without the cum-

bersome requisites of an umbrella membership organization, as well as with respect for the plurality and diversity of issues and forms of organizing. At the sessions and exhibits in the meeting, participants share expertise and inform on the latest details, offering updates on issues that others may know of only by hearsay or the occasional news note.

For example, this year, the binational Border Power Plant Working Group, headquartered in Tijuana and San Diego, presented the breaking news of an important victory for grassroots environmentalists. Just days earlier, a U.S. federal district court ruled that the Department of Energy and Bureau of Land Management broke the law by not preparing an environmental impact statement about the controversial effects on air and water of a project to build transmission lines linking the Sempra and Intergen power plants in Mexicali, Baja California, to the U.S. electric grid at an electric substation in Imperial County, California.

From local groups working on issues in their own neighborhoods to binational organizations taking on regional environmental threats, all encounter forms of empowerment in the meeting. Skills workshops build capacity for making and monitoring change. One workshop provided media training for activists. Other hands-on sessions over the years have covered everything from how to raise funds to how to evaluate environmental projects.

Examples of successful campaigns inspire ideas for others. In the most recent meeting, activists associated with the Sonoran Institute, Pronatura Sonora, and other groups explained how they have held a number of binational mobile seminars for journalists throughout the border area, aimed at increasing public knowledge about the Colorado River Delta and encouraging water conservation efforts. More media coverage and awareness support the popular education work being done by environmental groups in the region.

The meeting also helps to create a regional sense of identity and purpose among activists, raising participation in the cross-border environmental movement. Sometimes this boils down to something as simple as making direct contact with someone from the same area, working on the same issues, to wit: Two faculty members from the University of California-San Diego who met at the coffee pot during a recess agreed, in one's words, "You need to have forums like this, because in the daily grind, you don't meet."

Participants also found that the forum provides the opportunity to raise new issues or tackle old ones in new ways. For instance, the *Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental*, a community group based in Tijuana, seized the 2003 opening plenary session as an opportunity to announce a remediation plan it commissioned in tandem with the San Diego, California-based Environmental Health Coalition for 24,000 tons of hazardous waste the *Metales and Derivados* recycling company had abandoned at its site nearly a decade back. After years of demonstrations to demand corporate and government cleanup, the group's remediation plan represented a fresh tactic.

While the formally scheduled sessions served to impart information and analyze tendencies, for networking nothing compares to the hallway sessions and mealtime chats in-between scheduled events. For example, over late-night tacos, Carlos Vázquez of *Promoción Social Kolping* in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and Fuerza Ambiental Director Agustín Bravo of Chihuahua City, met and launched into a deep discussion about the differences in their respective experiences: Vázquez organizes urban dwellers to confront mountains of waste tires, and Bravo works to build a multi-cultural alliance in rural Copper Canyon to protect forest and water resources on Indian land. Despite the differences, they found common experience in the challenge of promoting environmental consciousness among people whose lives are marked by a

wide range of daily threats to their well being.

This high-quality give-and-take helps instill self-respect and pride in the movement, whose members spend much of their time in what often seems like lonely, little recognized roles of leadership. The meeting is a source of moral support and one of the sparse venues where environmental activists feel they are taken seriously, heard, and not marginalized or labeled as troublemakers opposed to progress. As several participants mentioned, it encourages them to go onward with projects for environmental justice, serving as a bulwark against the scorn, contempt, and snubs common when confronting defenders of non-sustainable development politics.

The meeting helps dissolve potential competition and misunderstanding among groups on opposite sides of the border and helps to assess tendencies in the binational balance. "In Mexico, the government is starting to find ways to protect the environment, and in the United States environmental protection is being eroded," observed Diana Liverman, a Meeting Executive Committee member from the University of Arizona. She noted that in the past U.S. activists lent support to their underserved Mexican colleagues in a context of little environmental protection and low civil society awareness in Mexico. Now, as anti-environmental policies gain ground in the United States, U.S. activists seek solidarity from south of the border to confront federal policies.

A few days of face-to-face discussion on common themes goes a long way toward bringing together activists, academics, journalists, business leaders, government administrators, elected representatives, and other stakeholders who attend. High on the schedule this year was a round table about public participation in the new U.S.-Mexico Environmental Border 2012 Program, which was led by U.S. EPA and Mexican environmental ministry administrators. Those who took part agreed that pressure from civil society will be

## CITIZENS' STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

- ✘ Maintain the public policies gained and garner more.
- ✘ Continue reaching out to a wider spectrum of stakeholders.
- ✘ Share more experiences in order to improve practices and raise enthusiasm.
- ✘ Maintain responsiveness and openness to public interest in organizations' projects.
- ✘ Demand clarity and accountability from government, for example in access to environmental information and in the criteria and procedures for the border environmental program.
- ✘ Hold interim sub-regional gatherings to assure clear mandates at the meeting.
- ✘ Strengthen electronic communication and media outreach.
- ✘ Be selective in establishing priorities for work on the border environment.
- ✘ Agree on short- and long-term goals for priorities, and follow through on achieving the goals.
- ✘ Demonstrate well-rooted, broad-based, inter-disciplinary cooperation in order to fetch funding.
- ✘ Encourage elected officials' participation in the meeting.
- ✘ Channel energy into strategic lobbying efforts.
- ✘ Act in more congruence with the principles of conservation.
- ✘ Promote so-called green goods and services via the meeting.
- ✘ Establish better channels to incorporate up-and-coming activists.
- ✘ Find new ways to effectively respond to communities' health and welfare needs.
- ✘ Join together in demanding responsibility from corporate polluters.

key in reverting U.S. elected officials' tendency to reduce funding for the program's objectives.

### **Citizens' Alternative Agenda for Action**

After four years, the impact of the meeting may seem diffuse. It can't claim a cause-and-effect relationship to curbing pollution at a particular site, for instance. But then, the for-

mat isn't designed to organize around a single issue. Instead it aims to create momentum that enables local activists to fight—and increasingly win—their own battles. On a larger level, it generates support for ongoing efforts to achieve a binational sustainable development ethos that leads to concrete measures.

Even so, the meeting's shared energy has resulted in important new initiatives. Participants in a workshop this year on obtaining access to environmental information spontaneously proposed to draft a letter calling on the Mexican government to broaden the list of industrial toxic wastes to be tracked under new mandatory reporting, so that Mexico can begin to bring its public Pollutant Release and Transfer Register up to par with those of the United States and Canada. The participants wrote and printed the letter, conducted a signature campaign during the meeting, and immediately sent the results to authorities in Mexico City via a personal emissary.

Laura Silvan, a member of the Meeting Executive Committee and leader of *Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental* in Tijuana, cited the initiative as an example of implementing the first of the five directives for the future identified during the event: to defend the public policy spaces already opened up, including access to information, and to gain more influence in policymaking. The other directives were:

- Continue to build alliances with various stakeholder sectors to achieve more impact.
- Keep sharing experiences and success stories to improve practices, as well as to maintain enthusiasm.
- Promote clarity in the criteria and procedures for the Border 2012 Program and assure that the activities outlined in it are carried through.
- Continue convoking the meeting, but make it a more viable permanent fixture

by grounding it in interim sub-regional meetings that can develop more polished and representative proposals.

## Organizing Notes

Organizers noted that the electronic and media outreach for this meeting was better than for any in the past. But they agreed on the need to strengthen that aspect, both to build internet communication between participants and to make meeting results better known to the general public. With scanty press coverage, even Tijuana locals have little idea of the proceedings, participants pointed out.

Assessment of progress is an integral part of the program and all participants were provided with printed evaluation forms. The closing session also included a forum for self-criticism, examining the work and making suggestions to improve the meeting. “Are we being as effective as we can be or are we simply putting out a lot of effort?” International City County Management Association representative Octavio Chávez asked as a prelude to the session. Emphasizing his question, Patricia Martínez of Pro Esteros, an Ensenada, Baja California-based riparian research and conservation group, noted that future foundation support increasingly will depend on being able to demonstrate competence, interdisciplinary approaches, broad-based cooperation, and a clear idea of the kind of results expected from the meeting.

Many participants worried out loud that funding for border environmental progress and for the meeting itself could dry up in the current U.S. political climate. Efforts to protect health and natural resources have been all but forgotten in the wave of anti-terrorist programs, commented speaker Lori Saldaña, a researcher at the Center for U.S.-Mexico Studies at the University of California-San Diego. She recommended involving more elected officials in the meeting in order to maintain a policy focus on border challenges that goes beyond the narrow view of security issues.

Mario Salzmann of *Fundación La Puerta*, a Tecate, Baja California-based philanthropist, said his organization supports the meeting with the hopes that participants will continue to progress from fomenting social participation to constituting a political lobby concerned with mechanisms for changing laws at different levels of U.S. and Mexican government. His is one of many foundations that, along with universities and individual philanthropists, constitute the financial underpinning of the event. Among them are: *Bio-Infex*; Cal EPA; Cecilia García Amaro; Charles Mott Foundation; Ford Foundation; *Fundación Margarita Miranda de Mascareñas*; International Community Foundation; *Soluciones Audiovisuales*; *Teléfonos del Noroeste S.A. de C.V.*; *Secretaría de Turismo*; William & Flora Hewlett Foundation; and Yolanda S. Walther-Meade.

While heartily applauding the meeting organizers’ and volunteers’ gargantuan efforts, participants proposed about two dozen ways to improve environmental activism and the meeting itself. Many focused on assuring the momentum of border organizing by institutionalizing channels for budding environmentalists and youth to become more involved, finding ways to respond better to what individual communities need in the way of health and welfare, and demanding accountability and corporate responsibility from pollution generators. Others emphasized the need to take advantage of and provide an outlet at the meeting for goods and services from the fair trade movement, as well as making sure the lodging hosts practice water and energy conservation.

## Local and Global Linkages

If the impact of the meeting is intangible, participants nonetheless agree that it serves as a positive tool for overcoming inertia in the realm of sustainable development in the complex and problem-ridden U.S.-Mexico border region. Proof is that leading activists from the United States and Mexico attend year after year to discuss problems and possi-



Participants develop a common agenda.

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ble solutions. As Silvan noted, “Our panelists included some of the most visionary people on our border. We’re all going away from here charged with new energy.”

Border Environmental Justice Campaign Advocate Connie García of the Environmental Health Coalition, who arrived at the forum proclaiming, “If we’re here for three days and nothing comes out of this it will be a failure,” left saying, “It was a very good encounter; it exceeded my expectations.” During the meeting, the coalition’s joint project with *Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental* succeeded in putting its community toxics remediation proposal into the hands of the Mexican environmental ministry’s International Affairs Unit Coordinator Olga Ojeda, who promised she would immediately deliver it to the minister for his response.

While this year’s event constituted a pleasant surprise for many first-time conference-goers, old-hats qualified it as a particularly gratifying experience. “It’s getting better and bet-

ter,” observed the Environmental Health Coalition’s Cesar Luna, who has attended all four border meetings, “both in terms of how the actual event is organized and the participation of individuals and academics who are much more focused on the issues they work on. You can tell by the presentations now there’s an evolution in how people are attacking the problems. Here they’re explaining their work; they’re much more strategic and more sophisticated as a movement.”

At this juncture, when concern over the impact of continental trade and geopolitics is erasing conventional borderlines, the Meeting on the Border Environment provides a model for exchanging knowledge and perspectives in the interest of solving problems through non-confrontational channels of cross-boundary action.

— Talli Nauman

# Resources

## RESOURCES

### Fourth Meeting on the Border Environment

Web: <http://www.encuentrofronterizo.org/>

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## ONLINE READING

### Third Meeting on the Border Environment

<http://sbs.arizona.edu/laac/border/2001/notes.html>

### Second Meeting on the Border Environment

<http://sbs.arizona.edu/laac/border/archives/1999/en1999.html>

### First Meeting on the Border Environment

<http://sbs.arizona.edu/laac/border/archives/1998/en1998.html>

### Border 2012 U.S.-Mexico Environmental Program

<http://www.epa.gov/usmexicoborder/>

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<http://www.americaspolicy.org/commentary/2002/0205water.html>

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<http://www.americaspolicy.org/articles/2002/0202beccnadb.html>

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