

Jan 1st, 12:00 PM

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Liz M. Lopez, "Was NAFTA a Blessing or a Curse to Mexico's Environmental Politics?" (January 1, 1996). *National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Annual Conference*. Paper 13.
<http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/naccs/1996/Proceedings/13>

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Was NAFTA a Blessing or a Curse to Mexico's Environmental Politics?

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We would achieve more progress if we could work more closely with our Mexican counterparts. Nafta will give us the momentum to do that.

—Jesus Reynoso, Director of Air Quality in El Paso

Mexico has to have the resources to deal with these problems. You can't deal with these issues if you are poor.

—Peter R. Haven, Director of the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis

The presidents of Mexico and the United States (US) signed the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on December 17, 1992. Its passage through Congress was not a smooth one since environmental organizations such as Friends of the Earth and the Sierra Club believed NAFTA did not incorporate adequate provision to combat the potential increase in pollution and depletion of natural resources resulting from trade liberalization. However, there were many other environmental organizations that favored the passage of NAFTA, such as the National Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Environmental Defense Fund. These environmental agencies believed the environment would benefit from the agreement because the Mexican government would be provided with the means to enforce necessary environmental regulations.

A geographical area that has benefited, but critics claim it has been harmed as a result of the passage of NAFTA, is the Mexico-US border. Supporters of NAFTA claim that this area has benefited because problems, such as, air and water pollution, that are created by *maquiladora* sectors—

duty free areas where goods mainly from the US are produced—have been addressed. On the other hand, critics of NAFTA claim that the Mexico-US border has been harmed because NAFTA's trade liberalizations have led to an increase in the construction of industries along the border. This has been a problem for the Mexican government since their resources and expertise have not been sufficient to efficiently impose environmental laws on these industries. NAFTA has certainly had a significant impact in Mexico's environmental politics, and set forth below are some of the positive and negative effects of the agreement.

I. The Evolution of NAFTA

The Negotiations Prior to Its Passage

In 1990 President Carlos Salinas de Gortari approached President Bush to negotiate a free trade agreement. A few months later Canada joined the trade negotiations. NAFTA opened the markets between these three nations while retaining a variety of environmental safeguards. Two years prior to NAFTA's passage by Congress in 1993, President Bush released on May 1, 1991 a document, "Plan of Action," under which the United States and Mexico agreed to review their environmental laws to see if they needed any revisions.

The presidential plan received the support of the National Wildlife Federation, the National Audubon Society, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the National Resources Defense Council. However, other environmental groups and policy makers criticized the document, "Plan of Action," because they believed it lacked goals, infrastructure, and specific resources. In order to appease critics, the Salinas administration agreed to allocate \$460 million to aid the regulation of air and water pollution in the cities near the Mexico-US border. In addition, the Mexican government hired 200 inspectors to monitor environmental laws. This was four times the number of inspectors the Mexican government employed in 1989. The Mexican government also ordered that 1,455 *maquiladoras* be re-certified by December 31, 1991¹. The American government, on the other hand, appeased the critics of the "Plan of Action" by promising \$241 million to be allocated during the 1992-1993 fiscal year toward environmental protection (Cánovas 1993: 335-39).

The North American Free Trade Agreement

NAFTA is composed of 22 chapters and is referred as the "greenest trade agreement" ever passed. Its principle goal is trade liberalization and, unlike the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) or the basic document governing institutional commerce, NAFTA mentions the word "environment" and has provisions to protect it (Editorial 1993: A-

32). The following are some of the provisions stated in NAFTA to protect the environment. First, NAFTA's preamble declares that its primary objective is to be the protection and conservation of the environment. NAFTA's participating nations are committed "to promote sustainable development" and "to strengthen the development and enforcement of environmental laws and regulations." (Anderson 1993: 52). For example, NAFTA has assigned \$813 million to improve the water and air quality along the Mexico-US border. Also, the Border Cooperation Commission (BCC) was designed to address the environmental problems along the border. One of the problems is that the toxic waste of foreign industries does not remain in Mexico. In addition, in order to decentralize the industries—and their pollution—along the Mexico-US border, all of Mexico will become a duty free zone (Editorial 1993: A-32). The Mexican government plans to implement a policy of "direct development." This policy will encourage industries to establish themselves in Mexican cities that are better able to absorb industrial activity. Also, these cities will have agencies capable of efficiently enforcing environmental standards.

Second, Article 104 in Chapter 1 guarantees that environmental treaties signed by participating countries will have precedence over their NAFTA obligations. As a result, the agreement does not undermine the environmental laws previously signed by the three participating nations. The treaties signed by these nations and recognized by NAFTA are the following: the 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, the Montreal Protocol, the 1989 Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Waste, the Mexico-US border area environment agreement, and any subsequent international agreement that the nations participating agree to include.

Third, Chapter 7 states that each nation has the right to establish the level of protection it considers necessary to protect human, animal, or plant life within its territories. Also, all three nations have agreed to base their regulations on scientific principles and risk assessments.

Fourth, Chapter 9 requires that all three nations work together to enhance the level of environmental protection. In addition, Chapter 9 requires the establishment of a committee to follow up on issues such as the development and enforcement of standards-related measures, namely, sanctions for polluters. This means that it is highly unlikely that one nation would be successful in challenging another nation's decision to prevent the import of the first nation's products, if those products could be harmful to the national health or its citizens.

Finally, Chapter 11 formally discourages a government from lowering its own environmental standards for the purpose of encouraging trade.

Opponents of NAFTA claim that it will undermine existing legislation

to protect the environment and that it will threaten US environmental sovereignty because it is likely that the US will lower its standards to the lowest common denominator to remain competitive. However, supporters of NAFTA argue that the agreement encourages, and also ensures, that the three participating nations will not lower their environmental standards. In addition, they argue that the US environmental laws will continue to be made and amended by Congress and State Legislators. This means that US sovereignty is not at risk since our country will continue to obey the existing environmental laws and create others when the need arises (Mathew 1993:A-23).

NAFTA's Side Agreements

Aspects of NAFTA that its critics and the Clinton administration felt had not been properly addressed were dealt with in the "side letter agreements" published on August 12, 1993.² Three of the clarifications made in the "side letter agreements" are stated below. Under NAFTA, if a nation in its attempt to liberalize trade harms the environment, a separate environmental authority is supposed to address the problem. The "side letter agreements" created the Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC) to:

monitor the implementation of NAFTA's environmental provisions, and provide information on compliance with domestic laws in all three countries, regularly reviewing and recommending improvements in compliance and enforcement . . . it would [also] help reduce incentives for pollution havens and the issue of different standards on non-tariff trade barriers . . . [its] effectiveness will depend on its degree of true oversight authority and its ability to influence, if not control, the flow of funds for trilateral action. (Runge 1994: 67)

Second, there was the concern that judges would not have enough environmental knowledge to recognize if a nation, in its attempt to increase trade flows, had damaged the environment. For this reason, it was key to address how judges could have access to environmental information that would help them make a fair court decision. As a result, the CEC secretariat maintains a roster of environmental experts separate from the roster of trade experts available to the NAFTA Trade Commission. The goal is that the environmental experts will help determine whether different standards are justified or not (Runge 1994: 68). Third, NAFTA did not establish a committee that would ensure nations did not lower their standards to facilitate trade. The side agreements stipulate that the CEC will serve as this committee. In order to fulfill its duties, the CEC will publish an annual report in which it has evaluated the implementation of NAFTA's environmental provisions and identified those which need to be amended as a result of, for example, changes in the

environment. In addition, the report will point out which countries have been lax in their enforcement or have lowered their environmental standards.

II. The Early Years of NAFTA

La Maldición

NAFTA has been successful in passing legislation to address environmental issues, such as water and air pollution, and bringing attention to the inefficiency of the Mexican government in addressing some of these issues. However, critics of NAFTA believe that the agreement has been a *maldición*—a curse—to Mexico's environmental laws and its territory. They argue that Mexico was not ready to receive the industries brought by trade liberalization. Moreover, critics of NAFTA have stated that the Mexican government has a bad record of environmental enforcement, particularly along the border with the US where many *maquiladoras* industries are located. They contend that as a result of NAFTA, Mexico will become a "haven for polluters" since Mexico has ineffective environmental laws.

It is true that the Mexican government has not been very successful in enforcing environmental action across its border with the US. However, the reason is not that they have been unwilling to tackle environmental issues, but that they lack the required funds to do so. Even though insufficient funds have been problem for the Mexican government, the government has made significant attempts to protect the environment. First, in 1988 Mexico enacted the General Law for Ecological Equilibrium and Environmental Protection, which is modeled on US law. This law provides a basis for environmental regulation and enforcement throughout Mexico. It covers air, water, hazardous waste, pollution, pesticides, and toxic chemicals. Second, since 1991 the fiscal budget for environmental agencies has been 1% of the GNP. The United States, on the other hand, assigns .5% of its fiscal budget to protect the environment (Cánovas 1993: 324). The total amount of money the US spends on the environment is larger than the amount Mexico spends, since the US economy is 20 times larger than the Mexican economy. Third, Mexico was the first country to ratify the Montreal Protocol. It agreed to stop the use of ozone depleting substances, e.g., CFC, by the same deadline as the US—10 years ahead of developing countries. Fourth, in 1991, 1,144 inspectors were hired and 706 industries were closed—56 of these industries were *maquiladoras*. Fifth, the Salinas de Gortari administration ordered several power stations to burn natural gas instead of sulfur. New cars are also being fitted with catalytic converters and drivers are banned from driving one day each week (Grabber 1993: 36). Finally, the Secretariat of Social Development

requires that new industries—public and private—submit an environmental impact statement (EIS) when environmental risk is deemed significant (Runge 1994: 63).

As a result of the passage of NAFTA, the Mexican government has been able to increase its environmental budget. This has been possible because of loans from the World Bank and the North America Development Bank funds. Between these two agencies the Mexican government received \$6 billion (Lee 1993: A-01). It was able to spend nearly \$500 million to protect the environment across the border: \$223 million to build sewage plants, \$26 million to construct solid waste disposal facilities, and \$44 million to create a border area nature preserve (HufBauer 1992: 135).

Critics of NAFTA still believe that the amount of money the Mexican government and NAFTA have allocated toward cleaning and protecting the environment along the Mexico-US border is not enough. They believe that the environment along the border would have been less polluted and would have retained more of its natural resources if NAFTA had not been passed. First, the Mexican government has pointed out that prior to the passage of NAFTA the *maquiladora* industry was already a booming industry in Mexico. In the 1960s Mexico, like many other under-developed countries, chose development over the protection of the environment when it implemented the *maquiladora* program. Second, many of the industries that have settled along the Mexico-US border have done so not because of its lenient environmental laws but because Mexico has a large pool of cheap unskilled labor. Finally, many economists and environmentalists believe that the increase in trade along the Mexico-US border will be beneficial to the environment since this change in the economy will increase Mexicans' GDP. The logic behind this argument is that individuals who have a GDP of \$5,000 demand cleaner air and stricter environmental legislation.

Las Maquiladoras

The *maquiladora* program was implemented in Mexico by presidential decree in 1965 when unemployment rates along the Mexico-US border soared toward seventy percent. (Holland 1997: 1219). The program dictated the border to be a duty free area where export goods could be produced. Most of the *maquiladora* industries that are located along the border are foreign owned and produce mainly exports for the US. In 1966, there were 12 *maquiladoras* that employed 3,000 workers while in 1991 there were 1,925 *maquiladoras* that employed 467,000 workers (Runge 1994: 62-3).

Mexico's lenient environmental laws have not been attracting industries to its border. Rather, it has been Mexico's abundant cheap labor force (Stoddard 1987: 2). As a result, it would be inappropriate to

conclude that industries during the late 1980s and early 1990s were re-locating to Mexico solely because it had less stringent environmental laws than the US. First, the cross-country variation in the costs of meeting environmental controls is not so large as to be a factor in the determination of a nation's comparative advantage. For example, it costs industries in the US about 1.1% to obey environmental regulations, while it costs industries in Mexico about 1% of gross revenues. Second, the cost of closing and re-locating is higher than 1.1% of all revenues. Third, Mexico's lenient environmental laws have begun to become tighter since the passage of NAFTA. Lastly, as the economy improves and Mexico becomes a fully industrialized society, it will be able to place more emphasis on environmental concerns.

Mexico's Per Capita Income

Economists like Gene Grossman and Alan Krueger from Princeton believe that the explosive growth of *maquiladoras* will have a positive impact on the environment. They claim that the level of sulfur dioxide increases per capita as income increases. However, at about \$5,000 per capita a turning point is reached. At this point, the levels of sulfur dioxide begin to decrease. According to a 1991 study in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Mexico's per capita income is \$4,900 (Mahony 1992: 51).

Grossman and Krueger argue that NAFTA can help the Mexican economy grow and reach the \$5,000 per capita point, where its citizens will demand cleaner air and can afford the technology that makes it possible. In addition, foreign industries transfer to Mexico modern technology that is cleaner. Also, NAFTA has forced nations to become specialized in what is most cost-effective. In the case of Mexico, these industries are textiles, agriculture and leather goods that produce less pollution than, for example, steel factories.

III. The 5th Anniversary of NAFTA: Promises and Realities

It is still debatable whether or not NAFTA has proved to be a curse to Mexico's environmental politics. The Commission for Environmental Cooperation has stated that currently there is no empirical data to support or deny this notion. In July 1997, a report to Congress by the Clinton Administration stated that NAFTA had begun to reverse decades of environmental neglect and had led to tougher enforcement of Mexican environmental laws ("NAFTA Administrative" 1997). On the other hand, this past fall (1998) the CEC published a study reporting that there has been a drop in pollution across North America. However, the study did

not include Mexico because it has yet to implement the necessary pollution reporting system (Brandon 1998: Business1 Zone C).

Funds

In 1991 Mexico allocated 1% of its GNP to environmental agencies. However, as a result of falling oil prices—which make up one-third of Mexico's revenues—and the devaluation of the *peso*, the federal government has been forced to make deep spending cuts across the board (Brandon 1998: Business 1 Zone C). At this point, the impact of Mexico's unstable economy on the environment cannot be fully assessed.

The North America Development Bank (NADB) was created by NAFTA to clean up pollution along the Mexico-US border, but it proved not to be very effective. NADB denied loans to poor communities needing cleanup loans because of the high risk of non-payments on the loans. It was not until 1996 when the US Environmental Protection Agency awarded NADB a \$170 million grant that they were able to make significant effort to cleanup pollution along the border. In January 1999 two landfills were to be completed, eight were under construction and two sewage plants were soon to begin construction (Brandon 1998: Business1 Zone C).

The Maquiladoras

The area along the Mexico-US border has continued to change since *maquiladoras* were first established.³ The border economy has been transformed from having assembly plants to manufacturing the parts they use, as well as from working class to middle class. There are now firms importing the most sophisticated equipment (Iliff and Corchado 1998: 1-J). For example, between 1994-1996, Mexico received \$25 billion in direct investment for plant and equipment. This is the second largest amount channeled to a developing country ever (Calle 1997: 295). In addition, there has been an exponential increase in corporate housing units, natural gas lines, multi-million dollar water projects, and environmental cleanups (Iliff and Corchado 1998: 1-J).

In the past few years, the Mexican government has been encouraging the establishment of *maquiladoras* away from the Mexico-US border, primarily to help reduce the high unemployment rates in areas like Chiapas (Iliff and Corchado 1998: 1-J; Mongelluzo 1998: 14-A). Currently, there are 4,100 registered *maquiladoras* (this number includes small businesses and corporations like Dephi). Approximately, 37 percent are now outside the Mexico-US border compared to 31 percent in 1997 (Fox 1998: Business L-05)⁴. Another factor that explains the shift of *maquiladoras* into the interior of Mexico is that the workforce is getting scarcer and harder to retain as a result of the numerous *maquiladoras* concentrated along the border. For example, the turnover rate along the

border is three-percent compared to the less than one-percent turnover in areas like Yucatán (Fox 1998: Business L-05).

When NAFTA was drafted the Mexican government agreed that by the year 2001 it would bring its *maquiladoras* preferential tariff schedule more in line with those of Canada and the US. This would be done to achieve uniform rates on goods exchanged among the three participating countries. As a result, *maquiladoras* that would use non-NAFTA components parts in 2001 would be less competitive because of a higher tariff structure (Sutter 1998a: 2-A). On Friday, November 13, 1998, Mexican Commerce Secretary, Herminio Blanco, released the first set of new rules affecting the \$51 billion *maquiladora* industry.

At this point, one can only speculate what the future holds for the *maquiladora* industry in Mexico. Individuals like Jesús Luis Zúñiga, executive adviser to Sony corporation, argue that the 2001 rules will be the end for *maquiladoras* (Lindquist 1998: Business C-1). One of the reasons is because Mexico's cheap labor force will not be a sufficient incentive for industries to maintain or to continue setting up their plants in Mexico (Lindquist 1998: Business C-1). On the other hand, Secretary Blanco disputes the claims that the *maquiladora* industry will end due to the 2001 adjustment in tariffs. He has stated that his agency will take a company-by-company approach and give NAFTA factories similar benefits to, for example, Asian *maquiladora* industries that cannot find components in the NAFTA region (Sutter 1998a: 2-A; Weiser 1998: 9-A).

Infrastructure Problem

When NAFTA came into effect supporters insisted that new investors along the border would bring additional funds to solve some of Mexico's infrastructure problems, such as: hazardous materials, solid waste, and sewage. Opponents, on the other hand, argued that NAFTA would lead to a downward harmonization of environmental standards along the Mexico-US border. Current projects addressing infrastructure problems in Mexico appear to be an indication of both supporters' and critics' predictions on NAFTA's impact on the environment⁵ (Saldaña 1998: B 9).

The International Wastewater Treatment Plant is located in San Diego and will be treating waste disposal from the bordering city of Tijuana. The creation of the plant indicates that there are new available funding sources and that a possible different set of environmental standards might be applied to sewage treatment plants.⁶ Lower standards are being considered to help Tijuana cope with the exponential waste that comes along with the new industries.⁷ Currently, the EPA and the International Boundary and Water Commission are evaluating treatment methods, such as, complete mixed aeration in order to comply with US environmental standards (Saldaña 1988: B-11).

Mexico and US officials are currently developing a computerized

system that would enable them to keep more accurate records of hazardous waste produced by *maquiladoras*. These plants would have to submit all information regarding chemical substances used as raw materials and the export of toxic residues. In addition, *maquiladoras* would be required to give a five-day warning when transporting waste material back to the US ("U.S. Mexico" 1998).⁸

Environmental Enforcement

The Clinton administration contends that NAFTA has led to an improvement in environmental law enforcement. First, the Mexican government has continued to increase the number of environmental inspectors since 1991. Second, Mexico reported a reduction in serious violations by *maquiladora* facilities from 1993-1996. Third, Mexico has established an environmental auditing program to promote voluntary compliance. As of April 1997, 617 facilities have completed such audits and 404 have signed compliance action plans representing more than \$800 million in planned environmental investments ("NAFTA Administrative 1997).

The Mexican government has continued to make efforts to enforce environmental laws but some of NAFTA's regulations are weakening or not furthering Mexico's efforts. First, to protect trade NAFTA permitted a provision to allow companies to sue countries whose pollution regulations hindered profits (Brandon 1998: Business 1 Zone C). For example, Metalclad Corporation, a southern California hazardous-waste disposal business plant, is seeking \$900 million in damages for being denied permission to open a landfill in central Mexico (Brandon 1998: Business 1 Zone C). Second, the agreement has not set a uniform standard for all three nations to enforce environmental laws. Instead, it gives non-governmental groups the right to raise complaints to the Montreal-based commission if one of the participating countries is not complying with its environmental laws (Ellingwood 1998: Part A-3). Currently, there are eight cases against Mexico, four against the United States, and eight against Canada pending review by the CEC (Brandon 1998: Business 1 Zone C). It is important to note that all the CEC can do is review the matter and publicize its findings (Ellingwood 1998: Part A-3).

IV. Conclusion

After seven years of NAFTA, it does not appear that it has been a curse to Mexico's environmental politics. Prior to the passage of NAFTA, the Mexico-US border had been a duty-free haven for many industries. It was not until the passage of NAFTA that the Mexican government was modestly successful in implementing sanctions against industries that

violated environmental laws. They had not been successful in the past thirty years mostly because the Mexican government lacked the funds to monitor polluting industries and to develop infrastructure-i.e., sewage treatment plants, etc.-along the Mexico-US border. The passage of NAFTA provided Mexico with the political pressure and funds necessary to develop infrastructure and pollution cleanup projects. However, these improvements have been slow to come.

NAFTA is only seven years old and it is still too early to tell all the benefits or setbacks that the agreement might cause to Mexico's environmental politics. However, one thing that can be said for certain is that without NAFTA it is unlikely that the Mexican government would have been able to achieve the recent improvements, although few, along the border. In addition, *maquiladoras* have brought pollution, funds, and jobs to Mexico but all such things may change by the year 2001.

Notes

1. In 1991, President Salinas was awarded the Earth prize for outstanding environmental statesmanship by the Nobel family and the United Nations (Anderson 1993: 51).
2. According to Holland, the NAFTA side agreements pose little direct threat to lessening the impact of US environmental laws. The provisions seek to preserve or strengthen enforcement of the participating countries domestic environmental laws. As a result, if any dilution of US environmental laws is going to occur, it will likely come through US initiatives (Holland 1997: 1253). An example of US initiative to lower environmental standards is the International Wastewater Plant in San Diego discussed in Section III.
3. Currently, there are a total of 2,952 maquiladora plants, like for example, Delphi, GM, etc. employing 1,000,305 workers according to data published by the Mexican government on November 1998. The textiles apparel sector has the largest number of plants (820, employing 202,572 workers). The electronic sector employs the largest number of workers (253,844 in 469 plants) ("Maquila Employment" 1998).
4. Aha-Yazaki Monterrey has signed an agreement with state and federal authorities to create a trust to build a plant in the state capital of Tuxtla Gutiérrez. The initial investment is \$5 million and production is scheduled to begin November 1999. The total investment should reach \$15 million and the plant will employ 2,300 workers. The government will put \$1.5 million in cash and train workers for the jobs (Sutter 1998b: 4-A).
5. In 1996, the GAO reported that rapid population and economic growth combined with insufficient infrastructure on the Mexican side of the border have contributed significantly to severe water pollution problems on both sides of the border. In its report, GAO recommended the use of gathered environmental data to set health and environmental criteria that will be used to prioritize the areas within the border region most needing infrastructure improvements (Holland 1997: 1247).
6. In September 1998, the North American Development Bank and the Border Environment Cooperation Commission declared that there are 11 clean-up projects totaling \$3 billion, mostly for sewage treatment plants. (Chacón 1998: A-10)
7. Tijuana's treatment plants are designed to treat only residential/organic waste and do little to remove industrial waste prior to being discharged onto a beach south of the city. Often this contaminated water travels through the Tijuana river and then into San Diego's waters (Opinion 1998: B-13).
8. *Maquiladoras* are required by US law to return to the US toxic residues that result

from the plants activities. In 1998, it is estimated that of the 60 percent of the 2,000 maquiladoras along the border which produce toxic waste, 15 percent had not returned their residues ("U.S. Mexico" 1998).

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