

National Park Service
Briefing Statement

Prepared for: Director
Submitted: July 15, 1997

State: Texas

Title: Visibility impacts at Big Bend NP from Carbon I and II power plants

Issue: Obtaining Mexico's cooperation in improving air quality at Big Bend

Background

- o Carbon I and II are 2 coal-fired power plants located in the Mexican state of Coahuila, about 20 miles south of Eagle Pass, TX and approximately 125 miles from Big Bend NP, a Class I area under the Clean Air Act.
- o Neither plant has air pollution controls for sulfur dioxide (SO₂) and collectively will emit between 170,000 and 240,000 tons of SO₂ annually into the atmosphere, equivalent to 9th largest SO₂ emitter in the U.S.
- o SO₂ emissions from these plants are converted to sulfate fine particles which contribute about 50% of the park's visibility impairment (in the form of regional hazes). Visibility degradation at Big Bend are at unacceptable levels; the park has the poorest visibility of any park in the western US where NPS collects data.
- o NPS studies have shown that when air masses arrive at Big Bend from the southeast (i.e., Mexico), visibility is poorest, implying that Mexican emissions significantly affect air quality at the park.
- o Since June 1993, the issue has attracted extensive local, regional and national media coverage (print and video), particularly during the Congressional debates on the passage of NAFTA.
- o NPS was part of a binational workgroup that investigated the Carbon II issue. Although NPS regional modeling studies indicated that the power plants contributed significantly to visibility impairment at the park, the workgroup issued a report in March 1996 attributing only a small contribution from the power plants. The workgroup, however, recommended additional regional studies be undertaken.
- o Visibility protection is not an environmental priority for Mexico given current problems with safe drinking water, adequate sewage treatment, garbage collection and toxic air pollutants along the US-Mexico border. Business Week reports that \$8 billion dollars are required to address basic environmental needs along the border.
- o There is no regulatory authority to require control of the Carbon power plants or to require emissions reductions in Mexico, even under the NAFTA Environmental Side Agreement. Both power plants meet current Mexican emission standards, although 10 times less stringent than US standards.
- o Secretary Babbitt has been briefed on this issue and the issue has been

discussed during meetings of the Binational Commission, on which Babbitt serves as a member. This issue was discussed by President Clinton and Mexican President Zedillo during his state visit to the US in Oct. 1995.

- o Texas ex-Governor Richards was very vocal in her concerns about the air quality impacts from the power plants, particularly as they relate to impacts on the McDonald Observatory located in the Davis Mountains of Texas. Current Gov. George Bush has also expressed an interest.
- o Rep. Henry Bonilla (R-Texas), whose district includes Big Bend, has been an open critic of the Carbon power plants and has hinted that future US aid to Mexico be contingent on control of the power plants. Bonilla will likely hold a public meeting at Big Bend this fall.

Status:

- o In May 1996, Mexico agreed to conduct a preliminary (or scoping) fine particle study in the region of northern Mexico and southwestern Texas. NPS ARD personnel coordinated this binational study which was conducted at 19 locations during September-October of 1996.
- o NPS has analyzed the results of this study and is awaiting a meeting with Mexico to discuss the results of this study and initiate plans for future studies. Results will not be released until US and Mexico have met.
- o At a meeting held in Matamoros, Mexico, May 28-30, 1997, Mexico agreed to participate in two additional intensive studies, which may include the use of tracers, to identify the major source regions and source types responsible for Big Bend's air quality problems.
- o EPA has provided over \$1 million to NPS to conduct the scoping and intensive studies; it is estimated that \$3 million will be required to perform the intensive studies. Private support will be solicited.
- o NPS/EPA team, which includes Big Bend Supt. Jose Cisneros, will brief TNRCC Commissioner Ralph Marquez, TNRCC Air Office Director, and Gov. Bush's staff on July 16. Bonilla's staff will be briefed on July 17.

Position of Interested Parties:

- o U.S. EPA favors a resolution to this issue and is prepared to fund as much of the intensive studies as possible. EPA has maintained a hard line in requiring Mexico to install SO₂ scrubbers on the power plants, but is willing to accept a regional emissions control strategy as an alternative.
- o Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC) -- the state regulatory authority -- has kept an arms length on the policy side, but is interested in the scientific/monitoring aspects. TNRCC staff assisted with the scoping study and will continue to assist in the intensive studies.
- o The electric utility sector will likely be very interested in the results of any intensive studies conducted as results may require additional emissions reductions from Texas utilities.
- o Environmental groups in Texas (EDF, Sierra Club) are interested in this issue and supportive of any efforts to improve air quality at Big Bend and

in other parts of Texas. EDF is looking for financial support to link health impacts of power plant emissions along US-Mexico border.

- o Public citizen groups and residents of the area have been very vocal on this issue and have written numerous letters to local, state, and national elected officials blaming deteriorating visibility to the power plants.

Department/Bureau Perspective:

- o NPS/DOI favors any emissions reduction strategy, including the control of the Carbon power plants, that will result in a noticeable improvement in air quality at Big Bend. As the Federal Land Manager responsible for visibility protection in Class I areas, NPS/DOI will continue to aggressively pursue measures within its statutory authorities and existing partnerships with Mexico to improve air quality in the region. NPS/DOI recognizes, however, that in order to improve air quality at Big Bend, emissions reductions on both sides of the border will likely be required.

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