

Carbon I and II

By Bill Hobby

Early in May a sewer line in Tijuana, Mexico, broke and dumped 12,000,000 gallons a day of untreated waste into the Pacific Ocean, polluting beaches as far up the coast as San Diego, California.

That pollution was an accident.

For about a decade Carbon I, a 1200-megawatt coal-fired power generating plant in Coahuila in northern Mexico, has been belching forth sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and dust, polluting the air in Coahuila and West Texas. The plant, 20 miles southwest of Eagle Pass, has no scrubbers or other devices to control harmful emissions.

That pollution is no accident. It is planned, deliberate, and ongoing. The Mexican government is planning first to double, triple that pollution. Carbon II is about to come onstream. Carbon III is being planned.

Carbon II and Carbon I will cough out about 200,000 tons of sulphur dioxide a year.

The National Park Service estimates that Carbon II will reduce visibility at the Big Bend National Park by 60 percent during the 8 to 11 months when winds blow from Rio Escondido, 130 miles away. Already, much of the time there is a thin, gray haze at Big Bend, compromising the once crystal-clear air. It could reduce visibility as far away as the Grand Canyon, where the view is already smudged by power plants on the U.S. side.

Carbon II could also harm the McDonald Observatory at Mt. Locke in Jeff Davis County. One of the great assets of the observatory is its clear, dark sky with an absence of light and other pollution.

Frank Bash, director of the Observatory, recently pointed out in letters to the Governor and the Ambassador to Mexico, that Carbon II will have a significant effect on the clarity of sky at McDonald. Just as disturbing is the damage acid emissions can do to the telescope mirrors and other delicate equipment at the observatory.

Mexico needs the power that will be generated from Carbon II, just as it needs the jobs that the power plant and coal mine will produce.

It makes sense for Mexico to fuel the plant from its 500 million tons of coal reserves. (The demand for coal at Carbon II has also generated a permit request for a coal mine on the U.S. side of the border near Eagle Pass. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department opposes the mine permit because it would reduce the riparian thornscrub that is habitat for the endangered ocelot and jaguarundi.)

Before the North American Free Trade Agreement, there wouldn't have been much hope for a solution that would provide power while protecting the natural and scientific resources of the Big Bend area.

Now it's in the best interest of both countries to keep border air pollution from getting worse, either by installing scrubbers at Carbon I and II or by co-firing with cleaner-burning natural gas.

During the past year, Texas twice has responded to Mexico's concerns about proposed toxic waste dumps near the Rio Grande River. Texas denied a permit for a radioactive dump in Kinney County. In a current case, the staff of the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission opposes an application by Chemical Waste Management, Inc., to put a hazardous waste dump in Terrell County.

Governor Richards recently pointed out to Mexican trade officials that Carbon II is viewed by environmental groups as the "single most important test of our two countries' promise to improve the environment".

"Installing appropriate technology or making other operational adjustments to reduce air pollution would provide dramatic and early proof that Mexico is committed to addressing difficult environmental problems that affect the United States.

"Reducing pollution from the plant will support my position that the NAFTA agreement is our best hope for cleaning up the border environment," she wrote to Dr. Herminio Blanco, Undersecretary of Unidad de Negociacion del Tratado de Libre Comercio.

One of the expected benefits of NAFTA is prosperity for the border region as goods move freely between markets. That prosperity must include a commitment to a cleaner border environment.

A coal plant without scrubbers is like a dog that's not housebroken. Let's hope Carbon II becomes a symbol of both countries' commitment, not an emblem of failure.

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