

U.S., Mexico Sign Environmental Pact To Protect Common Border

(Border 2012 designed to lower pollution for 12 million people in region)
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Washington -- The United States and Mexico have signed a new 10-year plan to further protect public health and the environment in the 3,200-kilometer border region where almost 12 million citizens of both countries live.

The new plan, called Border 2012, focuses on decreasing air, water, solid waste, and soil pollution, and lowering the risks of exposure to pesticides and other chemicals.

The program is the latest phase in the decades-long environmental relationship between the two countries, which included the 1983 La Paz agreement aimed at protecting and improving life on the U.S.-Mexico border. Border 2012 succeeds the 1996-2002 Border XXI program, which focused on air and water quality issues.

Border 2012 also builds upon the International Boundary and Water Commission of the United States and Mexico, and institutions created by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to address environmental concerns.

The new plan was signed April 4 in the border city of Tijuana, Mexico, by Linda Fisher, deputy administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and her Mexican counterpart, Raul Arriga.

The plan's major goals are to reduce water and land contamination, decrease air pollution, improve environmental health, reduce exposure to chemicals as a result of accidental chemical releases and/or acts of terrorism, and improve environmental performance through compliance, enforcement, pollution prevention, and promotion of environmental stewardship.

Fisher said at the signing ceremony that Border 2012 "further advances two decades of significant federal, state, and local achievements in protecting the environment and public health on both sides of the border.

We are excited by the prospect that the priorities we have set, and the actions we will take, will be based on input from local communities and organizations. We are convinced that this approach will keep us focused and greatly enhance our chances of success."

Arriga said the program "has made us more aware of the points we have in

common as well as the challenges we face jointly, instead of our differences." The Mexican official said the environment "does not know boundaries. On the contrary, the geography and resources that we share are the element that validates our friendship and binds our destinies."

The EPA said the plan emphasizes a "bottom-up, regional approach" working with state, local, and U.S. indigenous tribal governments. The specific concerns of the indigenous groups will be addressed to protect and preserve their cultural integrity within the program's broader environmental purposes.

The need for Border 2012 was spelled out by the EPA's 38-page background document. The agency said that over the last 20 years, population has grown rapidly in the border region, due in part to the maquiladora program which provided economic incentives to foreign (mostly U.S.-owned) assembly plants in Mexico.

The EPA said rapid population growth in urban areas has resulted in unplanned development, greater demand for land and energy, increased traffic congestion and waste generation, overburdened or unavailable waste treatment and disposal facilities, and more frequent chemical emergencies.

Meanwhile, residents in rural areas suffer from exposure to airborne dust, pesticide use, and inadequate water supply and waste treatment facilities.

Border residents also suffer disproportionately from many environmental health problems, including water-borne diseases and respiratory problems.

The EPA said Mexico's border area has a very low unemployment rate and high wages compared to other regions of the country. While economic growth has contributed to employment, the region's infrastructure has not kept pace. As a result, natural resources are strained and the environment and public health are adversely affected on both sides of the border.

The 10 border states involved in the new program are Baja California Norte, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas in Mexico, and California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas in the United States.

More information about Border 2012 is available at <http://www.epa.gov/usmexicoborder>; or in Spanish at <http://www.semarnat.gob.mx/frontera2012>.

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