Pollution concerns cloud free trade talks

Activists afraid pact will worsen problems

SUNDAY APR 7 1991

This is the first of a series of reports examining a proposed free trade agreement linking the United States and Canada with Mexico. Today: Environmental concerns.

By John Gravois
POST WASHINGTON BUREAU

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico — The Rio Grande is not the only landmark waterway here.

The other, which has no formal name, runs a 60-mile course, roughly north to south, parallel to the Rio Grande and the city limits of teeming El Paso.

THE COSTS OF FREE TRADE

Along the way, farmers use the liquid from the canal to irrigate their crops, some of which make their way across the nearby border to produce markets in the United States.

Insects that breed in and around the canal pester people on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, and seepage from the waterway is believed to infiltrate surrounding acquifers that feed the abundance of water wells in the area.

What sets the canal apart — besides its stench, unbearable even on a recent cool spring day — is that it is not fed by springs, rivers or other waterways. Its source is raw sewage and other waste pumped and drained in from thousands of residences and many of the more than 300 local *maquiladoras*, the term for industrial plants located near the border.

Some plants are newly painted with freshly manicured lawns in front, but out back large pipes carry their sewage waste directly to the canal.

"Excuse the language, but I call it a river of s--- because that's what it is," said Victor Munoz, an AFL-CIO field representative who monitors the bor-

Please see **BORDER, A-23**

BORDER: Pollution issues cloud free trade pact

From A-1

der region. The farms using the canal for irrigation generally prosper since the stuff reeks of fertility, he noted.

Unfortunately, the canal is anything but good for humans, Munoz lamented. As it has been for years, the rate of blood and intestinal tract diseases runs high in the area.

Juarez is one of several Mexican border cities with woefully inadequate sewage treatment facilities. Treatment plants are under construction in a few cities, but such plans in Juarez and most places remain on the drawing board. The AFL-CIO is part of a coalition of environmental, religious and public watchdog groups to demand that environmental and social issues be part of free trade negotiations between Mexico and the United States.

President Bush and his Mexican counterpart, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, await only a green light from the U.S. Congress to begin formal negotiations. Informal talks have been under way for months and continue today in Houston with a meeting between Bush and Salinas.

Government leaders on both sides have repeatedly insisted that although they are interested in addressing environmental and social concerns, such issues have no place in trade negotiations. However, they have left open the possibility of considering those issues in separate, possibly simultaneous, talks.

The United States already has a free trade accord with Canada, and adding Mexico would create a North American free trade zone with 360 million people and $6 trillion in economic activity.

The leaders of the three nations agree that a North American trading bloc is crucial if the continent is to keep pace with European and Asian traders, especially superpowers like Japan and Germany.

Bush has said he hopes to wrap up negotiations by the end of the year, although most experts predict an agreement won't be concluded until well into 1992.

The president wants "fast track" authority from Congress, meaning lawmakers would be allowed only to vote up or down on the agreement when it's finished. Congress could advise the administration, but it would be shut out of the actual negotiations and prohibited from making any amendments to what Bush lays out.

Congress has until June 1 to object to the fast track, or it is automatically approved. Objection from either the House or Senate would kill the fast track, which Bush claims would in turn kill free trade.

Bush and Salinas promise great things from free trade, namely a more vibrant economy in both nations, especially in much poorer Mexico. And with a stronger economy, the Mexican government should be able to muster the resources to provide more public services and better living conditions, the leaders contend.

But Munoz said the only example to judge by is the 25-year-old *maquiladora* program, in which foreign-owned companies got cheap labor and were given tariff and import-export fee breaks in return for operating plants in border communities, in hopes of providing widespread employment and a better quality of life in the depressed region.

"The promise of economic growth and all that goes with it has been around all these years, and look around you. What do you see? Poverty and pollution everywhere," Munoz said.

There are now almost 1,900 *maquiladoras,* most owned by U.S. firms, along the U.S.-Mexico border. Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans have been employed, but in the process, the population of border towns swelled and inadequate services became even more strained.

Juarez, which has almost 1.2 million residents, is the granddaddy of the *maquiladora* industry with more than 300 of the plants.

Many *maquiladora* workers labor in clean, modern plants but are stuck living in *colonias,* sprawling and impoverished communities of mud brick homes and cardboard shacks. They can afford no more because most are paid less than $1 an hour; even at that, *maquiladora* employees are among the better-paid border residents.

"Having a nice place to work doesn't translate into a healthy community, decent housing and a good quality of life," Munoz said.

He recently took a reporter, a fellow union official and Susan Mika, president of the Benedictine Sisters and chairwoman of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, on a tour of several Juarez *colonias* and the surrounding areas.

After dodging potholes as he wound through the mud streets of one *colonia* , Munoz explained that the makeshift community, unsanctioned by the local government, was built on an open and illegal garbage dump.

He drove to the edge of the *colonia,* where the dump was clearly still in active use. There were apparently fresh heaps of refuse everywhere, much of it partially burned. Scattered throughout the dump were scavengers.

"This is where the people from the *colonias* get all their building materials, storage tanks, everything — everything is recycled," Munoz said.

He stopped his car and the group got out to see what types of materials were being dumped. There were numerous piles of electrical circuit boards and other plastic materials that Munoz said could come from nowhere but *maquiladoras.*

There also were several bright blue plastic jugs with "sulfuric acid solution" warning labels. The jugs were partially cut, apparently in an attempt to keep anyone from reusing them, but Munoz said it wasn't enough.

"Someone will take these home to use as some sort of container. Nothing goes to waste," he maintained.

The scavenging problem doesn't exist only at the unregulated dumps in Juarez. Munoz and Mika told of an instance at a city-operated dump a few years ago in which an American company dumped unknown amounts of "green rocks," plastic-like lumps of toluene, the toxic ingredient in various solvents and glues that children sniff to get high.

Of course, said Mika, word got out among the youth of Juarez "and a lot of kids were getting high and it was very dangerous." The mess was cleaned up shortly after local officials caught wind of it.

But Juarez's pollution problems go much further.

Inadequate emission controls still allow heavy pollution from automobiles, and in the hills around the city, residents burn tires in winter to keep warm. The unhealthy smoke frequently drifts into contiguous El Paso, which has more than 500,000 residents.

"It's sad and hazardous, but how else are you going to keep warm if you live in poverty and have nothing else to burn?" Munoz asked.

Mika, Munoz and other members of their band of special interest groups — operating under the title Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras — maintain they're not opposed necessarily to free trade. They just want to ensure that negotiations cover social and environmental issues.

They contend the best way to do that is for the businesses and governments of Mexico and the United States to adopt a Maquiladora Standards of Conduct that the group drafted.

Among the standards is a pledge by industry to fully comply with Mexican environmental regulations that are loosely enforced and a promise by businesses to contribute more to improving public services in Mexico. "These are many of the richest companies in America; they have an obligation to the communities they are in," Munoz argued.

Many *maquiladoras* already annually contribute an amount equal to 5 percent of their plant wages to an infrastructure improvement fund. Juarez *maquiladoras* have pledged to fund $4.8 million worth of improvements over the next three years.

Environmentalists and union activists aren't the only ones complaining about the lack of results coming from the fund. Companies claim they've contributed millions, thinking the money would be used for local improvements only to see the money kept in the capital, Mexico City, for projects there.

Chuck Almquist, manager of a General Motors plant in Matamoros, just across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, said GM alone contributed more than $11 million to the infrastructure fund over the past five years. The result: only about a half-dozen low-income houses built in Matamoros.

"I have no control at all (over the fund)," Almquist said. "It goes to Mexico City."

He said he'd be glad to consider proposing that GM increase its contribution, but only "if we could see a benefit."

Most U.S. business and government officials involved in the early stages of free trade talks believe the controversy over corporate contributions is typical of the objections raised by environmentalists and union activists — well-intentioned but misguided.

Corporate officials said the way to do something to get more results from the fund is to lobby the Mexican government to change its appropriations practices, not hassle U.S. firms that already are contributing millions of dollars.

Likewise with the environment. El Paso Mayor Suzie Azar, who has a first-hand view of border problems, said the best way to literally clear the air is to back free trade and stabilize the Mexican economy so its government can afford to enforce its already-tough environmental standards.

And, Azar stressed, what's good for the Mexican border economy is good for commerce on the U.S. side as well.

Mexico's *Secretaria de Desarrallo Urbano Y Ecologia* (SEDUE) has some standards that are tougher than U.S. regulations, and the environmental agency has begun a crackdown on violators, shutting down some plants, including a state-owned energy facility in smog-plagued Mexico City.

"Things already have gotten better," Azar said.

"It's easy for these groups to go after the plants and make them look really bad, but if they don't compare it to the way conditions were just a few years ago and how things have improved, it's wrong," she said.

"The fact is, Mexico is in a financial pickle and can't afford to suddenly have all this enforcement and other things. We need to help get them squared away so they can afford to do the job," added Azar.

"We want clean air and clean water and all these things we care so dearly about, but all of that is kind of lofty when you've still got people in Juarez living in sad, sad poverty. If free trade passes, I'll say 'God bless us' because we helped stabilize that economy."

Monday: Economic aspects.

John Gravois/The Houston Post

An irrigation system near Juarez, Mexico, supplies water from a sewage-filled canal.