



EL SALVADOR TODAY: Advocacy Issues Series

Metallic Mineral Mining in El Salvador

The possibility of mineral mining threatens SHARE partner communities in the Chalatenango and northern San Salvador regions. Mining is also projected for the Departments of Cabañas, Morazán and La Unión.

Mining in El Salvador is largely being undertaken by Canadian multinational corporations. To date, the Salvadoran Office of Mining and Hydrocarbons has approved over 30 mining exploration licenses and one exploitation license for the exploration of gold and possible silver concentrations. With these licenses, under national mining law the companies are only allowed to explore and mine with the permission of land owners, yet some exploration has been undertaken despite the strong objections of affected communities. The entrance of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) into force on March 1, 2006, has strengthened multinationals' rights and further weakened community control of lands and resources.

Mine proponents argue that the activity will bring much needed money to impoverished regions of El Salvador, yet in reality Salvadorans will not receive major benefits. For example, in Cabañas, Pacific Rim/Intrepid Corporation's estimates stipulate that while \$30 million in profit will be produced for foreign shareholders, only \$300,000 will reach the local government. Because the companies will import their own workers to do technical work, only 300 Salvadorans are projected to be employed in low-paying temporary jobs that will last for only 8 years. There is also a question of whether any workers from these communities will even be hired, since some companies have refused to hire workers from communities that protest mining.

The movement against the prospective mining operation has grown since the first protests in Chalatenango in October 2005, when residents formed a human chain to block mining company representatives from entering their communities. Local efforts have fed into the formation of the National Committee against Mining, which advocates on national policy and serves as a clearinghouse for local activities. The Committee has lobbied the Salvadoran government to stop granting licenses for exploration, and convinced Hugo Barrera, the Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources (MARN), to go on record against the mining. Barrera's support was key, given that the MARN must approve applications for mining exploration before permits are granted. Unfortunately, in December 2006, Barrera was replaced by Carlos Guerrero, a Salvadoran with ties to the construction industry.

In December 2006, the Committee presented legislation to the Economic and Agricultural Commission of the Legislative Assembly which would reform existing mining legislation and ban all metallic mineral mining in El Salvador. If the Commission passes the proposal out of committee, the proposed legislation will be up for consideration and vote in the full Assembly.

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In March 2007, Rep. Michaud (ME) and twenty-six members of the U.S. Congress addressed a letter to Salvadoran party leaders in support of the mining reform legislation. **Stay tuned to hear about the letter and SHARE other ways for you and your committee to support the ongoing struggle!**

Social, Economic and Environmental Impacts of Metallic Mineral Mining

1. **Competition for water consumption.** A small mining project consumes more than 104 liters of water per second which is 7,400 gallons of water per day and 2,701,000 gallons each year. How many families' water consumption needs could be provided for with the amount of water that a company would consume in just one day?
2. **Deepening of the water level.** The use of tons of explosives for open pit and/or subterranean excavations will cause the deepening or diverting of the water table, increasing the scarcity of water for the population.
3. **Poisoning of the water.** To extract the gold, the companies will use tons of cyanide, which dissolves in water, to remove gold and silver from crushed rocks daily. Cyanide is a deadly toxic substance which can kill an adult with a portion smaller than a grain of rice. The waste from the gold and silver extraction stays in the environment, producing acid waste mixed with heavy metals that will pollute rivers and streams.
4. **Landscape forever affected.** Millions of tons of sterile crushed rock will remain exposed and the landscape will lose its beauty. Erosion from the mountains of sterile waste can affect aquatic life and raise sediment levels in the rivers. Cave-ins can also be produced by subterranean excavation. Furthermore, the fauna will be disturbed or driven off by the noise and contamination of the air and water.
5. **Health risks.** The air will be contaminated with solid impurities, like dust, and toxic or inert gases able to penetrate to the lungs. The air will be contaminated with cyanide, mercury, and sulfur dioxide vapors. Long-term exposure to a small dose produces headaches, loss of appetite, weakness, nausea, dizziness, and irritation to the eyes and respiratory system. Lead seriously affects pregnant women, causing miscarriage, damage to physical and mental development of the fetus, and premature birth. It also harms the health of children and raises the arterial pressure of adults. Many suffer from cancer and chronic skin disorders.
6. **Economic Damage.** Agricultural production, fishing, and the livestock industries will be put at risk due to the level of contamination of the water. The many people who depend upon the Lempa River will have to buy water or transport water from far away.

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