

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

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DATE: January 11, 2000

TO: Coastal Commissioners and Interested Public

FROM: Peter M. Douglas, Executive Director
Sarah Christie, Legislative Coordinator

SUBJECT: RESOLUTION OPPOSING PROPOSED SALTWORKS DEVELOPMENT AT
SAN IGNACIO LAGOON

Note:

This information can be accessed through the Commission's World Wide Web
Homepage at <http://ceres.ca.gov/coastalcomm/index.html>

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY

The Mitsubishi Corporation, in a joint venture with the Mexican government through an entity known as Exporta de Sal, S.A. (ESSA) has plans to build the world's largest salt evaporation facility in Mexico's Laguna San Ignacio. Based on information available to staff, the proposed facility would pump 6,000 gallons of water per second out of the lagoon via 17 high volume pumps, and necessitate the flooding of 116 square miles of natural salt flats, tidal marsh and mangrove swamps for the creation of evaporation ponds. The project also includes a million-ton salt stockpile, and construction of a 1.25 mile long pier with a shipping dock and support facilities. The footprint of the facility is larger than the lagoon itself.

Mitsubishi submitted an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the proposed project in 1994, which was rejected by Mexico's National Institute of Ecology after generating substantial opposition from Mexican and international environmental groups. A second EIA is currently under review by Mexico's Secretariat for the Environment, Natural Resources and Fisheries. A public review draft is expected in January 2000.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Laguna San Ignacio provides critical habitat for the California gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*) which migrates along the Pacific Coast between Baja California and Alaska. Laguna San Ignacio is one of the few undeveloped breeding and calving grounds left in the world for this species of whale. The California gray whale contributes to the California economy and occupies a vital niche in the state's diverse marine ecosystem. Migratory species are particularly vulnerable to the cumulative impacts of habitat degradation, because incremental changes in far flung areas with multiple jurisdictions preclude the comprehensive understanding and management that is possible with residential populations. In the case of the California gray whale, climate changes affecting food supplies in the Bering Sea, disruption of historic migration routes due to human activities, and loss of breeding and calving lagoons in Mexico and Southern California due to development over the last 100 years may all be playing a role. Although removed from the federal endangered species list in 1994, an unusually high mortality rate during the 1998-99 migration has caused speculation among the scientific community regarding increased pressures on the population.

Laguna San Ignacio also provides critical habitat for a variety of other endangered marine species, including white pelicans, fishing eagles, and green, leatherback and caguama sea turtles. Impacts from increased industrial and commercial use of the area could interfere with the reproductive success of the whales that depend on this lagoon. The site was determined to have sufficient biological significance that it has been declared a gray whale refuge by the Mexican government, included in the El Vizcaino Biosphere reserve, and designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

The production of the salt, intended for chemical and industrial applications, produces a toxic brine byproduct containing magnesium sulfate, potassium chloride, bromine, iodine and boron, which would be flushed back into the neighboring Bahia de los Ballenas (Whale Bay). Recent spills resulting in toxic brine plumes in 1997 and 1998 at the nearby Laguna Ojo de Liebre saltworks have killed fish and turtles. The effects of brine spills on gray whales have not been studied.

Increased commercial ship traffic increases the likelihood of collision with whales, particularly calves and nursing cows. The 1.25 mile long pier perpendicular to the mouth of the calving lagoon, directly in the path of migrating whales, and the intensified industrial use of this area, is generally incompatible with the continued function as habitat suitable for breeding and calving.

The destruction of mangrove swamps would eliminate their important function of preventing coastal erosion and filtering runoff, contributing to an overall decrease in water quality. Loss of mangrove swamps for the construction of aquaculture facilities has accelerated in recent years, contributing to global loss of wetlands.

More than 25 local governments in California, including the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, the San Francisco County Board of Supervisors, the Sonoma County Board of supervisors, the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors, the Eureka City Council, the Los Angeles City Council and the Malibu City Council have passed resolutions opposing the proposed development.

III. RECOMMENDED ACTION

Staff recommends the Commission adopt the attached resolution opposing industrial development of Laguna San Ignacio, and urging Mitsubishi Corporation to withdraw its proposal. The staff also recommends that copies of the Resolution be forwarded to Mitsubishi Corporation and federal administration.

RESOLUTION BY THE
CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION
IN OPPOSITION TO
THE CONSTRUCTION AND OPERATION OF
A PROPOSED SALT FACTORY
AT LAGUNA SAN IGNACIO IN BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

Whereas: The California Coastal Commission was established by the People of California through initiative statute in 1972 and made permanent in 1976 by the California Legislature as the State's principal coastal management agency with diverse responsibilities, including but not limited to, "...ensur(ing) conformity with the provisions of...(the California Coastal Act),...to protect regional, state and national interests in assuring the maintenance of the long-term productivity and economic vitality of coastal resources necessary for the well-being of the people of the state...;"

Whereas: The California Coastal Act also provides that in order "...to avoid long-term costs to the public and a diminished quality of life resulting from the misuse of coastal resources, to coordinate and integrate the activities of the many agencies whose activities impact the coastal zone, and to supplement their activities in matters not properly within the jurisdiction of any existing agency, it is necessary to provide for continued state coastal planning and management through a state coastal commission;"

Whereas: The California gray whale migrates annually along the coast of California, between its winter breeding and calving grounds in Mexico and its summer feeding grounds in Alaska;

Whereas: The California gray whale contributes significantly to the economic viability of coastal communities by supporting a multi-million dollar eco-tourism industry;

Whereas: The California gray whale has an inestimable intrinsic value to current and future generations of Californians and the nation;

Whereas: The continued health and viability of the California gray whale population is dependent upon all states and countries along the migration route maintaining safe and adequate habitat for feeding, breeding and calving;

Whereas: The recent increase in gray whale mortality during the 1998-99 migration may demonstrate that the population is experiencing increasing stress from external factors, thus making preservation of its breeding and calving areas even more critical;

Whereas: Laguna San Ignacio, as the last pristine breeding and calving area for the California Gray Whale, provides critical habitat for that species as well as other marine species;

Whereas: Laguna San Ignacio has been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage site, included within the El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve and designated as a whale sanctuary by the Mexican government,

Whereas: The Mitsubishi Corporation's proposed construction of the world's largest salt factory at Laguna San Ignacio threatens to disrupt the health, integrity and biological productivity of lagoon ecosystems as the result of, among other factors, increased salinity, diminution of water quality, ship traffic, noise and contamination;

Whereas: Brine spills from a similar facility have resulted in fish kills and the 1997 deaths of 94 endangered black sea turtles;

Whereas: Independent scientific review of the project by 34 marine scientists has determined that the proposed facility poses an "unacceptable risk" to the environment; and,

Whereas: Preservation of the environmental integrity and unaltered condition of this world-famous lagoon will symbolize to the citizens of Mexico, to its neighbors to the north, and to the world community of nations a deep and abiding commitment to sound long-term coastal environmental stewardship for the immeasurable benefit of current and future generations,

Therefore, Be it Resolved: That the California Coastal Commission hereby respectfully requests and urges the Mitsubishi Corporation to withdraw its plan to construct a saltworks at Laguna San Ignacio.

Be it Further Resolved that the California Coastal Commission requests that the administration of President Clinton, including but not limited to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. State Department work with the Mexican government to preserve the permanent environmental integrity of Laguna San Ignacio pursuant to international conservation treaties, conventions, understandings and other applicable bi-lateral or multi-national protocols.

This resolution was adopted by the
California Coastal Commission on
January _____, 2000 by a _____ vote.

Sara Wan, Chair