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even enlisted the support of powerful government officials such as state governors and the national ombudsman against the spraying campaign, arguing instead for a less destructive manual-eradication effort.

In response, environmental authorities in 2001 specifically banned aerial fumigation in parks and their buffer areas. But in June, the government of President Álvaro Uribe, who was elected in 2002, authorized fumigation in parks.

And after taking a contrary tack earlier, the U.S. Congress in December agreed to allow U.S. funds under the \$2.6 billion Plan Colombia anti-drug program to be used for spraying in protected areas provided "there are no effective alternatives."

Critics fear the stage is set.

"The government already has authorized spraying in parks," says Juan Mayr, a former environment minister and vice president of the World Conservation Union (IUCN). "It's an attack on the biodiversity of the nation, an atrocity."

Drug officials argue it would be disastrous if Colombia's illegal guerrilla and paramilitary armies were to move steadily more of their drug operations into parks to avoid spraying.

Even some who oppose aerial fumigation agree. Says Ernesto Guhl, a former deputy environment minister: "I'm against fumigation. But it would be absurd to allow drug sanctuaries in the parks, where drug traffickers could operate with impunity."

Follow-up: Anna Cederstav, Program Director, Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense (Aida), Oakland CA, (510) 550-6700, acederstav@aida2.org; Ernesto Guhl, Director, Quinaxi Institute, Bogotá, +(571) 612-4789 ernestoguhl@quinaxi.org; Juan Mayr, Member, Panel of Eminent Persons on UN-Civil Society Relations, New York, NY, juanmayr@hotmail.com; Col. Álvaro Velandia, Deputy Director, Colombian Anti-Narcotics Police, Bogotá, +(571) 315-9000, pressa@policia.gov.co.

Reef-preservation initiative to receive USAID, UN funds

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Foundation (UNF) said this month they will provide US\$3 million over three years for a broad-based effort to protect the 625-mile (1,000-km) Mesoamerican Barrier Reef.

Representatives of public agencies, non-governmental groups and businesses will address a range of problems blamed for damaging the Caribbean reef system. The goal will be to work in Belize and Guatemala to develop a means of monitoring, conserving and managing the reef, the U.S. embassy in Belize says.

The Mesoamerican Reef is the largest barrier coral reef system in the western hemisphere and the second largest in the world. Unesco has designated portions of it as world heritage sites.

Among the many problems affecting the reef are over-fishing, inappropriate aquaculture, unregulated coastal and island development, unsustainable tourism, industrial pollution, and emissions from ports and ships, as well as storms and the effects of climate change.

The alliance formed to combat these problems will be led by the British-based International Coral Reef Action Network (Icran), an umbrella group of 15 multilateral and non-governmental organizations working to improve the health of the world's reefs.

Its objective is to address three major areas—watershed management, sustainable fisheries and sustainable tourism—with the cooperation of stakeholders ranging from community groups and institutions to cruise-ship lines and agricultural operations.

Shaun Paul, director of EcoLogic, a U.S. nonprofit that supports community-based environmental projects in

Belize and Guatemala, says he is generally wary of large projects because they often involve too much policy and research and too little action on the ground.

But in the case of the reef initiative, he adds, he is hopeful.

"It is challenging for anyone to translate such noble aspirations into effective practices with specific reefs, specific species and specific communities," Paul says. "The UNF, USAID and others have developed a cooperative approach among donors, which is no small task."

Follow-up: Alison Glass, Programme Assistant, ICRAN, Cambridge, United Kingdom, +(44) 1223-277-314, aglass@icran.org, www.icran.org; Shaun Paul, director, EcoLogic, spaul@ecologic.org, Cambridge, Massachusetts, (617) 441-6300 Ext. 101.



SGS may resume forestry oversight role in Ecuador

Talks are being held in Ecuador to find a way for the Swiss company Société Générale de Surveillance (SGS) to resume forestry-oversight services in the country.

Last June, SGS began carrying out forestry-control duties such as issuing and reviewing logging permits. It did so as part of a novel outsourcing of forestry-oversight that has won praise from environmentalists and others for helping to check corruption and illegal logging.

But last October, Ecuador's Constitutional Tribunal struck down key aspects of the outsourcing program, and in November the Environment Ministry took over the supervisory duties contracted to SGS.

With SGS poised to sue the government and international aid agencies upset by the short-circuiting of the outsourcing program, President Lucio Gutiérrez in late December ordered Foreign Minister Patricio Zuquillanda and

Attorney General José María Borja to help find a solution.

The two ministers offered their good offices to ad-hoc negotiators representing the Environment Ministry, the timber industry, SGS, green groups, and Ecuador's foresters' association. The resulting talks have gone on since early last month.

A key hurdle has been the stumpage tax the Environment Ministry levies on every cubic meter of wood felled; loggers consider it too high.

Environment Minister César Narváez says negotiators discussed cutting the tax from US\$2 per cubic meter to \$1.50.

That would reduce the annual revenues the levy generates for the ministry to US\$250,000 from the current \$1 million, but the Economy Ministry would transfer funds to the environmental agency to make up the difference, Narváez says.

The solution, however, did not mollify loggers, who complained they not only have to pay the stumpage tax, but also a US\$2.50-per-cubic-meter charge that SGS collects as compensation and sundry other fees. They say they cannot pay more than a total of US\$3.70 per cubic meter of timber felled.

Narváez says he would be willing to lower the stumpage tax further, to US\$1.30 per cubic meter. While this could end the impasse with loggers, he says, the government still must resolve legal issues that prompted the Constitutional Tribunal to reject portions of the outsourcing program.

According to Narváez, experts from the Ecuadorian Comptroller's Office are exploring ways to do so.

Follow-up: César Berni, Contracts Manager, SGS, Quito, Ecuador, +(59 32) 225-2300, cesar_berni@sgs.com; César Narváez, Environment Minister of Ecuador, +(59 32) 256-3462; cnarvaez@ambiente.gov.ec; Mauricio Teran, Representative, Timber Industry Association (Aima), +(59 32) 292-3798; mauricioteran@comafors.