

News from Congresswoman NYDIA M. VELÁZQUEZ

Representing New York's 7th Congressional District • Brooklyn, Manhattan & Queens
Ranking Member, House Small Business Committee



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CONTACT: Velázquez Press Office, (202) 225-2361
Serrano Press Office, (202) 225-4361

Velázquez and Serrano Seek to Block Arecibo Incinerator

Washington, DC –Reps. Nydia M. Velázquez (D-NY) and José E. Serrano today wrote the U.S. Department of Agriculture to oppose financing for the construction of a waste-to-energy generation and resource facility in Arecibo, Puerto Rico. The Members of Congress wrote that the local community has not been allowed appropriate input on the proposed incinerator and that the project raises significant environmental concerns.

“Residents of Arecibo deserve projects that enhance their quality of life, not degrade their environment and create health risks,” Velázquez said. “The federal government should not be financing the development of dangerous facilities without a full assessment of the environmental effects and an open, inclusive discussion that takes into account local community needs.”

“As a consistent supporter of a clean environment for my constituents and the American people, I am very concerned about the lack of a full environmental impact assessment for the proposed incinerator. The views of the residents of Arecibo have not been taken into account. As a result, I must oppose the federal financing of this facility because its environmental and health consequences have not been fully disclosed, and because they will likely outweigh any potential benefits,” said Congressman José E. Serrano.

The full text of the letter is below.

September 3, 2015

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We are writing to express our opposition to the firm Energy Answers' proposed waste-to-energy generation and resource facility in Arecibo, Puerto Rico. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Utilities Service (RUS) is currently considering whether or not to provide financing to this project and has recently released a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The draft EIS does not adequately address or assess the potential environmental and health impacts that the proposed facility, if approved, would pose to the Arecibo community. Moreover, the RUS' outreach to the local community on this project has been inadequate, leaving the community without a meaningful process in which they can share their feedback and concerns.

Arecibo, Puerto Rico, a region that is poor and whose population is mostly comprised of ethnic minorities, is home to a number of polluting industrial facilities. Specifically, the region has 11 Superfund locations, a medical waste incinerator, the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority Cambalache Power Plant, the Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority Barrio Islote Sewer Treatment Plant, and the Arecibo Municipal Landfill, among others. These industries have had serious impacts on the health and well-being of Arecibo residents. For example, as a result of pollution caused by a battery recycling plant in Arecibo, the local air exceeded legal lead limits and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declared Arecibo a nonattainment zone. Children in Arecibo still suffer the effects of lead contamination caused by the plant. Given this history and the anticipated impacts of the proposed facility, it is no surprise that local government entities and members of the community strongly oppose this project. The people of Arecibo deserve investments that will improve their quality of life, not contribute to its deterioration.

While Arecibo is home to a wide-range of industries, the region also contains unique natural resources that would be adversely affected if the facility were to be built. Among the natural ecosystems in the region are:

1. Caño Tiburones Natural Reserve: The proposed facility is located within the western tip of the Caño Tiburones Natural reserve, which is the largest wetland in Puerto Rico. In the reserve, fresh water from the karst and salty ocean water interact to create a unique habitat consisting of estuarine, palustrine, and lacustrine wetlands with around 200 bird species and more than 100 flora species. Caño Tiburones is recognized as an important migratory bird habitat.
2. Cambalache State Forest: The proposed facility is located a few miles to the west of this forest, which is an important part of the karst ecosystem in the region, including an underground water system. Important populations of endemic birds and trees are protected within Cambalache State Forest.
3. Río Abajo State Forest: The proposed facility is eight miles to the north of Río Abajo State Forest, which spans 5,780 acres. Río Abajo contains about 175 types of trees, 47 of which are designated as endangered species. Further, there is an important program underway in Río Abajo, aimed at restoring the Puerto Rican parrot. The effort is a joint partnership between the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Sources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Forest Service.
4. Dos Bocas Reservoir: Dos Bocas is one of the most important reservoirs in Puerto Rico, as it serves a key source of potable water for the San Juan metropolitan region.
5. Indian's Cave and the Bishops Watering Hole: The proposed facility is just a few hundred meters away from these natural resources which, in addition to being important components of the region's ecosystem, are key historic and cultural sites as well.

These unique natural resources would be threatened if the project was approved, causing damage not only to local ecosystems, but to the Puerto Rican tourism industry.

We also have deep concerns about the way that RUS has proceeded with the public hearing process as related to the proposed facility and the draft EIS. Particularly troubling is the fact that the RUS representatives who presided over the hearing on the draft EIS did not speak Spanish, nor was simultaneous translation provided for them, thereby rendering the community unable to have their concerns addressed and responded to at the hearing. While we assume these hearings will be translated at a later point so that they can be reviewed by these officials, the failure of the RUS to provide such services violates the spirit of a public hearing process and greatly diminishes the rights of the U.S. citizens who live in Arecibo.

Finally, while Energy Answers is seeking financing for the project through RUS loan programs, the organizations that represent the island's seventy-eight municipalities, the Puerto Rico Mayors Association and the Puerto Rico Mayors Federation, have stated their opposition to the project and have testified that they will not send their waste to Energy Answers under any circumstances. Given this opposition, the ability of RUS to recoup any funds invested in the project is uncertain. Moreover, it is unclear why RUS would be an appropriate funding source altogether, as the energy generated by the proposed plant would not be targeted to the surrounding community and would only meet an extremely small portion of the island's energy needs.

With these concerns in mind, we urge your agency to reject this proposal, as the project would not create sufficient benefits to offset the significant environmental, health, and economic consequences that it would create. Please do not hesitate to contact us or our staffs if you have any questions or would like to discuss this matter further.

Sincerely,

Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress

José E. Serrano
Member of Congress

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