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Central America's Protection of Freshwater Resources (supported by USG programs)

The seven countries of Central America - Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama - are taking a lead in responding to the Commission for Sustainable Development's mandate on the protection and supply of freshwater resources by developing the world's first regional plan to satisfy the freshwater needs of its citizens. Nationally, and with the support of USAID and other USG agencies (notably the Environmental Protection Agency) and international donors, they are already taking significant measures leading to the creation of a predictable regulatory and enforcement environment for private sector investment in water quality. The vision, plan and concrete actions of the Central American nations in this area clearly demonstrate their political will in fulfilling the water-related commitments of major international agreements, including the Rio Summit, the Central American Alliance for Sustainable Development (ALIDES) and CONCAUSA. The lessons learned from this unique collaborative experience can be useful in guiding other nations to develop regional approaches that address the sustainable development of transboundary water resources.

The origins of the regional water initiative are found in the Central American Parliament's 1994 recommendations for coordinated isthmus-wide actions in this area. At their July 1997 Summit the Central American Presidents and Primer Minister (Belize) ratified their concern for the long-term protection and rationale utilization of freshwater resources by approving the development of a regional action plan under the auspices of the Central American Commission for the Environment and Development (CCAD), USAID's principal partner in the Regional Environmental Project for Central America (PROARCA). That document is currently being finalized and by mid-1998 will be reviewed (in a process sponsored by DANIDA) for approval by major regional and national agencies dealing with water issues, for its subsequent consideration by the Central American heads of state. Among the key proposals are the comprehensive inventory of the region's water resources, the strengthening of institutions responsible for data collection, the strengthening of information exchange mechanisms, improved inter-institutional coordination, land-use planning focussed on watersheds to optimize the sustainable use of natural resources, greater consideration of water-related environmental impacts in development projects, and regulatory incentives to promote the private sector conservation of watersheds.

The draft regional initiative, as well as already-developed national programs and regulatory frameworks, place Central America well ahead of the 2000 target date established by the CSD for the establishment of "costed and targeted national action programmes" and "appropriate institutional structures and legal instruments." Within the soon-to-be unified Secretariat for Central American Integration, the Environmental Directorship (the present CCAD) will have the leading role in coordinating regional initiatives on the availability and quality of safe water.

The U.S. role in providing demand-driven support to Central American environmental initiatives over the past several years has been critical to the success to-date in establishing a favorable investment climate based upon a wide array of legal and technical accomplishments and on-going activities related to water resource management. The PROARCA collaborative

partnership of USAID/G-CAP, CCAD, EPA, and major U S -based NGOs and private firms, as well as bilateral USAID-supported programs in environment and health, are addressing safe water issues at the regional, national and local levels

The current programs build on broad-based USAID-supported regional and bilateral institutional strengthening and technology transfer programs in environment and natural resources management Tens of thousands of extensionists, farmers, health practitioners, teachers and trainers have been trained in areas that positively affect the sound management and conservation of freshwater resources integrated watershed management, plantation and natural forest management, sustainable agriculture, pesticide management, integrated pest management, and environmental education

The current collaborative Central American efforts, shaped within the framework of *the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor* and supported by major USG programs, closely follow the freshwater priorities of the CSD The Corridor is envisioned as an integrated regional network of key parks and protected areas which are interconnected through terrestrial and marine corridors (buffer zones, multiple use zones, etc), providing environmentally-sound goods and services to Central American citizens and promoting investment in the conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources The policy and management components of the various programs that support the establishment of the Corridor logically address the principal considerations corresponding to the conservation and sustainable use of freshwater resources These considerations range from top-level political and legal initiatives to the promotion of on-the-ground practices that require or result in the protection vital water resources An example of the latter is the watershed protection that is occurring throughout the region, benefitting areas as large as the Panama Canal watershed, and as small as the micro-watersheds that serve village-level communities

Regional accomplishments related to the protection of freshwater resources

* Environmental legislation and pollution prevention programs jointly implemented under USAID/PROARCA by the CCAD and EPA in response to the regionally USG-financed study that determined that solid waste, waste water and pesticides are the principal national pollution threats These programs, which provide a stable and positive legal climate for investment initiatives that preserve and protect water resources, include

Technical assistance and training provided to national and local governments in the management, treatment (including the introduction of clean technologies) and disposal of solid waste, waste water and pesticides At the municipal level, USAID-financed activities include the development and operation of local action plans developed through participatory processes

Training of Central American judges, prosecutors, public attorneys, legal advisors, NGOs and business associations in environmental law, regulations and enforcement issues that impact on water

Training of government and NGO representatives in legal and technical aspects of environmental impact assessments

Technical assistance provided to national legislatures and executive branches in the drafting and introduction of environmental laws and regulations

* The development and dissemination of regional policy analyses that document the incentives and disincentives of existing national laws and regulations, including those relating directly to the management and utilization of water resources

* Protected areas management activities that lead to the conservation of essential watersheds located in parks and reserves

* Promotion and demonstration of the economic viability of productive land uses compatible with biodiversity, including sustainable plantation forestry, natural forestry management and environmentally-friendly agricultural practices for coffee, bananas, citrus, etc. Such land uses lead to the protection and conservation of water sources as well as require their sustainable utilization in order to be successfully undertaken

* Regional small grants programs for local NGOs and community groups, focussing on environmental education, eco-tourism and the involvement of local citizenry in decision-making processes related to natural resource management

* An integrated coastal management program that works with local NGOs and communities to promote beneficial changes in coastal ecosystem management, resource use patterns and investment decisions in selected protected and managed areas, through the implementation of local environmental action plans and the resolution of environmental problems in cross-border areas. A critical element of the program addresses the development and implementation of "best practice" natural resource management and economic activities that include the protection of upstream watersheds that are the source of water for personal consumption and irrigation by local populations