

Tijuana trash salvagers fear loss of their livelihood

by Anna Cearley - CNS

TIJUANA, Mexico - For decades, hundreds of people known as pepenadores have earned a living in Tijuana's oldest municipal dump, picking through tons of trash for recyclable goods.

Now most of the trash is going directly to a newer dump at the city's eastern perimeter, putting the pepenadores' future in question, for better or worse.

City officials say the work puts the scavengers' lives and health at risk, and it won't be allowed at the new dump.

But some residents worry they won't be able to find other jobs. The work carries a certain stigma, and many who do it never completed their education.

DUMP - Jose Ruiz, 79, hauled his recyclables down the hill after a busy morning in Tijuana. The number of pepenadores, people who scavenge for recyclables to sell, has dropped from 900 to a couple hundred. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis.

Guillermo Torres Robles, who has worked for 17 years at the dump, pools his earnings with those of other family members, including his wife and two of their three children.

Last summer, the family earned about \$30 a day selling material it salvaged from metal parts, plastic containers, cardboard boxes, spoiling food and other debris, he said.

"Now, some days we make maybe 50 pesos (about \$5) between all of us," Torres said. "Some days we don't make anything."

Andres Puentes Melendres, director of public services for the city of Tijuana, said the number of pepenadores has dropped from 900 to a couple hundred.

Among those abandoning the work was Torres' brother-in-law, who recently left the older dump near the Fausto González neighborhood after three decades to become a security guard.

The pepenadores were part of a vast political and economic structure that grew around the profitability of trash in Mexico, but they are slowly disappearing as Mexican dump managers modernize their operations.

Tijuana, a city of at least 1.2 million, produces 2,300 tons of trash a day. About 1,400 of that is collected by the city and an additional 900 tons is collected by Grupo Ecologico del Norte, a private company that manages both dump sites, according to Puentes.

For 35 years the city's trash went to the Fausto González-area dump, Puentes said.

When the new dump opened in 2003, the distribution of the trash was split between the two facilities as the workers held protests to try and protect their source of income.

In February, the older dump stopped processing trash. It has been a holding site for some of the city's garbage before being taken to the newer dump.

Most trash is now taken directly to the newer dump, where there are plans to build a factory to separate the recyclables. The amount of city-collected trash taken to the older dump site has declined from 850 tons a day to 100 tons a day, Puentes said.

By the end of the year, the older dump will close entirely, said dump manager Antonio Gonzalez Flores.

Although the newer dump isn't supposed to allow pepenadores, some believe workers could pressure the city and dump managers to let them commute to the newer dump, said David Lynch, director of San Ysidro, Calif.-based Responsibility, a nonprofit organization that runs a kindergarten and computer classes for children of families who work at the trash dump.

With less trash to pick now, workers with basic reading skills are looking for jobs in factories where wages can be about the same as picking trash. If the remaining pepenadores can't find work at the new dump, they will probably move to other trash dumps in Mexico, said Felipe Quiroz, a teacher at the kindergarten who used to work at the dump.

As the pepenadores face new challenges, Lynch's group remains committed to the residents of Fausto Gonzalez, funneling donations toward rebuilding the community's schools.

"Our idea of educating the people is to get them out of the dump, so maybe this is more of a little bit of a push in the right direction," Lynch said.

Correspondent Yvette De La Garza contributed to this report.

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