

Mexico set to offer bidding on megaport

by Diane Lindquist

Mexico plans to start the bidding process that will lead to development of the Colonet megaport and rail line in Baja California before December, a high-ranking official said Friday.

In a telephone interview from Mexico City, Manuel Rodriguez Arregui, Mexico's undersecretary of communication and transportation, said no date has been set for opening the auction geared at attracting private companies to build and operate the massive port-rail system, expected to cost as much as \$9 billion.

But in discussing a trip he made last week to Colonet, about 150 miles south of San Diego, Rodriguez went beyond previous statements in which he has said the bid would be let before the end of the year.

Speaking of his comments at the Colonet meeting, he said, "I said it would be before December."

International and domestic maritime and rail companies have been concerned the project has been delayed as much as three years by a group's claims to property under the bay at Punta Colonet, the megaport's location.

The port is seen as an alternative to the congested ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles in moving cargo from Asia through Mexico and into the United States. The Colonet port is expected to be as large as those two ports combined, processing annually as much as 6 million to 8 million TEUs, or 20-foot equivalent units, the maritime standard.

Now the federal government has taken action to cancel the claim of the mineral group, Grupo Minero Lobos, and the project appears to be moving forward.

The June 15 gathering at Colonet was the first time officials from the city of Ensenada, the state of Baja California and the federal government of Mexico have all paid a mutual visit to Colonet, an agricultural community of about 3,000 residents about five miles inland from the port's anticipated location.

Those attending included Transportation Undersecretary Rodriguez, Baja California Secretary General Bernardo Martinez Aguirre, Ensenada Mayor Cesar Mancillas Amador, and members of ejido communal farms who own property at the port and rail sites.

"This is what we'd been looking for for about two years, and finally we're working together," said Jesus Lara, leader of five of the area's communal groups.

Lara said the property owners, who favor the port-rail project, have been asked for their input to the state's creation of a master plan for the 6,200-acre expanse that is expected to be developed as a result of the port-rail activities. A city with as many as 200,000 inhabitants is anticipated to develop around the operation.

Colonet, which straddles the transpeninsular highway about 50 miles south of Ensenada, is expected to be affected most by the development.

"The community already agreed with the zoning," Lara said. "The whole community is working to make this happen."

Â© Copley News Service

Mexico set to offer bidding on megaport by Diane Lindquist