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GATEWAY TO THE PACIFIC

Por Harold D. Hunt

La Entrada al Pacífico

Growth in truck traffic between Texas and Mexico has been nothing short of phenomenal. About 12,000 trucks per day crossed between Texas and Mexico in 2001. Most trucks cross the Texas-Mexico border on highways routed through Laredo, El Paso or the Rio Grande Valley.

A proposed highway called La Entrada al Pacífico ("Gateway to the Pacific") from Mexico's Pacific coast through the City of Presidio to Lamesa, Texas, would offer an additional route for truck traffic that has increased more than 150 percent since the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

If constructed, La Entrada will provide a more direct link from Mexico's Pacific coast to cities in the northeastern United States, the primary destination for NAFTA traffic passing through Texas. It currently takes more than 20 hours to drive from Port Topolobampo, a deep-water port on the Pacific Ocean in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, to the bridge crossing at Ojinaga-Presidio on existing roads. La Entrada could cut that time in half.

Supporters argue that if La Entrada were built, Asian parts and components could be shipped more rapidly through Port Topolobampo to Mexican maquiladoras along the Texas border. They would then be assembled into finished products and sold in the United States. Asian companies are finding Mexican maquiladoras increasingly appealing for the production of goods sold in American markets.

Agricultural shipments could benefit from La Entrada as well. The bulk of winter produce sold in the United States is now shipped from west-central Mexico through Nogales, Arizona,

because no alternative route through Texas exists. About 1,000 trucks per day cross the border at Nogales during the winter produce season. Much of this traffic could be diverted to the La Entrada route, significantly reducing produce shipping times to the heavily populated areas of the eastern United States.

Governor of Chihuahua Patricio Martinez has expressed a desire to complete the section of La Entrada from Chihuahua City to Ojinaga by the end of his term in 2004. A new section under construction (see map) between El Morrion and La Mula will skirt the Peguis Mountains, providing a better alternative to the narrow, mountainous road that now leads to Ojinaga. The governor believes that La Entrada could relieve some of the pressure on El Paso border crossings while increasing the potential for economic development in northeastern Chihuahua.

Private developers in Sinaloa have expressed an interest in seeing La Entrada completed. They believe a major highway from Presidio through Copper Canyon, one of the most scenic areas in Mexico, to the Pacific coast in Sinaloa could encourage more resort hotel development in the state. La Entrada could facilitate further maquiladora plant construction in Sinaloa as well. Generally seen as a border phenomenon, maquiladoras also are being located deeper within Mexico's interior to take advantage of lower labor costs.

On the U.S. side, a combination of cities, counties and private citizens in the Midland-Odessa area known as MOTRAN (Midland-Odessa Transportation Alliance) have been working since 1997 to promote the highway's construction. The group maintains that La Entrada will create economic benefits and expand trade opportunities throughout the Midland-Odessa region.

The idea for a trade route from Mexico's Pacific coast to the eastern United States through Texas is not new. However, a highway capable of handling heavy truck traffic has never been completed through this Mexican corridor because of several significant hurdles.

By far, the most daunting task will be constructing the 121-mile section of highway between the Mexican cities of Choix and San Rafael. This section crosses the Sierra Madres through Copper Canyon, which is actually a series of 20 canyons covering more than 20,000 square miles. No highway exists through this stretch of rough terrain. Plans call for the roadway to be constructed roughly parallel to an existing Chihuahua Pacifico railroad line, a line that required more than 40 bridges and 80 tunnels to cross Copper Canyon. This section of La Entrada is currently slated for completion by 2010.

Another limitation will be the Ojinaga-Presidio bridge crossing.

Constructed in 1987, the bridge facilities can handle only a limited number of heavy trucks. About 9,000 northbound trucks will cross the Presidio bridge this year. By comparison, Laredo's bridges handle that many northbound crossings in two days. The facilities are being upgraded and within 18 months should be able to handle a maximum of 300 trucks per day, about ten times the traffic crossing there now. A second bridge has been discussed; however, it is unlikely that there will be sufficient need for it after the present commercial inspection facilities are upgraded.

Although most Texas cities along the La Entrada route view its development favorably, leaders of Alpine and Marfa do not. These two cities have no bypasses, so truck traffic travels directly through the town centers. The prospect of increased truck traffic prompted the formation of an activist group in Alpine known as TNT or "Tourists Not Trucks." State Representative Pete Gallego (D-Alpine) has asked the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to study alternative routes around both Alpine and Marfa. Preliminary estimates indicate about 1.5 miles of highway would be required for a loop around Marfa while an Alpine bypass might require as much as five miles with estimated construction time of five to eight years.

Other TxDOT activity involving the La Entrada route is under way as well. TxDOT recently committed funds to construct a Hwy. 349 reliever route around Midland to accommodate truck traffic destined for Lubbock and Amarillo. The 15-mile construction project is scheduled to open bids in



Proposed Route of La Entrada al Pacifico

Highway Route	Approximate Distance (miles)	Current Status	Currently Planned Upgrades to Mexican Sections
<i>Mexican Section</i>			
Port Topolobampo to San Blas	38	4-lane divided highway	None
San Blas to Choix	60	2-lane paved road	4-lane divided highway by 2005
Choix to San Rafael	121	no road	2-lane paved road by 2010
San Rafael to San Pedro	90	2-lane paved road	None
San Pedro to Cuauhtemoc	34	2-lane paved road	4-lane divided highway by 2005
Cuauhtemoc to Chihuahua City	58	4-lane divided highway	None
Chihuahua City to Aldama	20	4-lane divided highway	None
Aldama to El Morrion	31	2-lane paved road	4-lane divided highway by 2003
El Morrion to La Mula	69	no road	2-lane paved road by 2002 & 4-lane divided highway by 2004
La Mula to Ojinaga (U.S./Mexico Border)	27	2-lane paved road	4-lane divided highway by 2003
Total Mileage (approx.) to U.S. Border	548		
<i>Main U.S. Section</i>			
Presidio to Marfa via Hwy-67	61	2-lane paved road	
Marfa to Alpine via Hwy-67	26	2-lane paved road	
Alpine to I-10 via Hwy-67	48	2-lane paved road	
I-10 to Fort Stockton	10	4-lane divided highway	
Fort Stockton to McCamey via Hwy-67 & 385	46	2-lane paved road	
McCamey to Odessa via Hwy-385	53	2-lane paved road	
Odessa to Midland via I-20	20	4-lane divided highway	
Total Mileage (approx.) Presidio to Midland	264		
<i>Alternative 1 Leaving Midland</i>			
Midland to Lamesa via Hwy-349	55	2-lane paved road	
Lamesa to Lubbock via Hwy-87	62	2-lane paved road	
Lubbock to Amarillo via I-27	118	2-lane paved road	
Total Mileage (approx.) Midland to Amarillo	235		
<i>Alternative 2 Leaving Midland</i>			
Midland to Abilene via I-20	141	4-lane divided highway	
Abilene to Wichita Falls via Hwy-277	134	2-lane paved road	
Total Mileage (approx.) Midland to Wichita Falls	275		
<i>Alternative 3 Leaving Midland</i>			
Midland to Fort Worth via I-20	283	4-lane divided highway	
Fort Worth to Dallas via I-20	50	4-lane divided highway	
Total Mileage (approx.) Midland to Dallas	333		

mid-2002. TxDOT is conducting a study for a proposed bypass around Lamesa and the expansion of Hwy. 349 south of Lamesa to Midland.

Even if La Entrada is completed and trucking companies choose to use the route, economic activity in many of the Texas cities along the La Entrada corridor may not increase. Currently, trucks transporting goods from Mexico into the United States must stop at the border to be inspected by U.S. Customs and other government agencies. Because trucking companies typically expect long-haul drivers to cover about 600 miles per day before a layover, Texas cities along NAFTA routes but away from the border may not reap an economic benefit from La Entrada other than increased truck-stop activity.

In the future, if Mexican and American trucks are allowed to start from interior cities and cross the U.S.-Mexico border without stopping, a completely new set of cities could benefit

from NAFTA traffic. Optimal destinations for economic development, such as factories or warehouse-distribution centers, could change. However, an open border for NAFTA truck-related traffic will not occur overnight. Pancho Benavides, an executive for trucking company M.S. Carriers, predicts that the transformation to an open border "will be more like an evolution than a revolution."

The director of highway planning for the Mexican state of Chihuahua asserts that in ten years 4,000 trucks per day could be using the La Entrada al Pacifico route. If La Entrada is in fact completed in ten years, it could enhance demand for warehouse-distribution real estate development in Texas cities located roughly 600 miles from the border. 📍

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