

Dead Frogs and Oil Spills: Reconciling Kuczynski's Promise of Clean Water with Peru's Recurring Industrial Pollution Incidents

By Laura Sholtz, Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs

On October 14, the Peruvian National Forestry and Wildlife Service announced that they would open an investigation into the unexpected deaths of approximately 10,000 Titicaca water frogs, an endangered species living in Lake Titicaca on Peru's southeastern border with Bolivia.ⁱ The incident was originally reported by Maruja Inquilla Sucasaca, an environmental activist from the Committee Against the Pollution of the Coata River, who brought more than 100 dead frogs to officials in Puno, the largest Peruvian city on the world's highest navigable lake. The incident gives further legitimacy to concerns about the threat that pollution poses to the fish living in the lake that the surrounding population depends upon for food.

On the opposite side of the country, there has been a recent uptick in the rate of oil spills. In mid-August, nearly 4,000 barrels of oil were spilled from the North Peruvian Pipeline near the community of Nueva Alianza in the Peruvian Amazon. Another spill was soon reported on September 24 along the River Pastaza near the border with Ecuador.ⁱⁱ On October 16, authorities announced yet another pipeline spill, even after PetroPeru was supposed to have shut down all pipeline operations in order to perform much needed infrastructure maintenance.ⁱⁱⁱ Altogether, there have been eight oil spills this year alone and, as a result, pressure continues to mount on the government to tighten regulations on oil companies and the construction firms that they contract.

Peru is certainly no stranger to water pollution, as rural communities have suffered from disasters brought on by the oil and mining sectors since the first days of mineral and oil extraction. Newly inaugurated President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski has repeatedly committed to improving access to clean water for all Peruvians, but his policy proposals glaringly lack any measures to prevent incidents of water pollution or crack down on corporate pollution perpetrators.

National Water Policy

Before running for president, Kuczynski started *Agualimpia*, a non-governmental organization (NGO) focused on providing community-based access to water, sanitation, and microcredit.^{iv} His interest in water and sanitation policy found its

way into his presidential campaign platform, in which he promised that his administration would implement a Clean Water Program—*Programa AguaLimpia*—to provide access to clean water for all families, especially those living in the Amazon basin.^v The plan specifically proposes subsidies for the construction of water related infrastructure, elevated familial water tanks in semi-urban areas, rain water collection systems for 20 zones in the rural Amazon, and the strengthening and streamlining of government water agencies.^{vi} *Serra Azul*, *Programa AguaLimpia*'s sister plan for the Andes, pledges to “rebuild Andean canal systems, build dams, reservoirs and filtration trenches, and support small farmers with the aim of rehabilitating 1,000 square kilometers of agricultural terraces known as *andenes*.”^{vii}

Kuczynski's plans are necessary in Peru, a nation in which the World Bank estimates 91 percent of the urban population and only 69 percent of the rural population have access to safe drinking water (or in World Bank terminology, an improved water source).^{viii} Peru's geographic features make it almost impossible to physically transport water to those in rural areas, especially isolated communities high in the Andes and indigenous groups living in the vast but sparsely populated Amazonian region of Loreto. Compounding the difficulties of isolation, these communities are disproportionately impacted by forest destruction and intrusive oil infrastructure. The 550km North Peruvian Pipeline, Peru's longest, links the northwestern Peruvian coast just south of Piura to the small Amazonian cities of Andoas and Saramuro, the latter sitting along the Mariñón river at the edge of the Pacaya-Samira National Reserve.^{ix} The sheer length of this pipeline, which passes through arid desert, mountains, and rainforest, makes it particularly vulnerable to leaks that can contaminate water near rural and indigenous communities.

This very pipeline was the source of significant oil spills in both February and August. PetroPeru has publically blamed the spills on vandalism by members of nearby indigenous communities in order for local workers to receive wages for cleanup efforts, but there has yet to be any evidence to corroborate this claim.^x Furthermore, it is difficult to believe that people who depend on local rivers for drinking water and fish would deliberately spill toxic chemicals that will cause adverse environmental and health effects for years.

Mining Pollution

Water pollution from mining operations, an issue not currently covered in the news, has been an ongoing problem for communities in the Andes amid Peru's economic growth. The export of vast reserves of copper, silver, and gold has fueled impressive economic growth in recent years as mineral exports account for approximately 60 percent of Peru's total shipments abroad.^{xi} The negative side of this industry, however, is the destruction of Amazon forest, the proliferation of illegal mining operations, and the use of harmful chemicals in mining processes. For example, sulfuric acid—a highly corrosive chemical that causes severe skin burns—is commonly used to separate copper

from ore before being discarded into the surrounding environment. Mercury from gold mining sites often finds its way into drinking water and can lead to mercury poisoning, which causes internal organ failure. Just this May, the Peruvian government declared a 60-day emergency to address excess mercury poisoning from illegal gold mining in southern Peru, although mercury pollution problems did not end during this period. ^{xii}

The extent to which oil and mineral extraction are central to Peru's economy but at the same time contribute to environmental degradation and dangerous water pollution frames the challenges that Kuczynski must face to successfully provide clean water to all Peruvians. Rural communities that need the most help from the state in order to access clean water and sanitation services are also disproportionately affected by pollution from extractive industries. However, the growth of mineral extraction and exportation has increased incomes for some Peruvians who live and work closely with these particular industries. On the other hand, the Peruvian government has pursued a strategy to increase investment as fast as possible and as a result has applied little scrutiny to mining companies during the approval of new projects. Therefore, the Kuczynski-led government's great challenge will be to encourage continued economic growth while increasing scrutiny of new projects and rigorously enforcing penalties on companies who pollute.

The Peruvian government should increase its support for rural communities beyond the proposals laid out in Kuczynski's Clean Water Program. Modern technologies like rain collection and filtration systems are necessary to expand rural access to clean water, but addressing the root causes of unsafe drinking water—including industrial pollution—should be a primary goal of any water safety plan. Therefore, Kuczynski should approach his Clean Water Program in a more holistic way if he truly wants to ensure safe drinking water for generations of Peruvians.

ⁱ "Serfor informa la muerte de más de 10 mil ranas en río Coata, en Puno." *Serfor.gob.pe*. October 14, 2016. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.serfor.gob.pe/noticias/fauna-silvestre/serfor-evalua-muerte-de-mas-de-10-mil-ranas-en-rio-coata-en-puno>

ⁱⁱ Hill, David. "Peru's new president summoned to Amazon by indigenous protestors." *The Guardian*. September 27, 2016. Accessed October 20, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/andes-to-the-amazon/2016/sep/27/perus-president-amazon-indigenous-protestors>

ⁱⁱⁱ "Oil Spill hits Peru's Amazon – Again" *Telesurtv.net*. October 16, 2016. Accessed October 21, 2016. <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Oil-Spill-Hits-Perus-Amazon--Again-20161016-0006.html>

^{iv} *Agualimpia.org*. Accessed October 21, 2016. <http://www.agualimpia.org/>

^v Plan de Gobierno: Agua. *PPK.pe*. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://ppk.pe/plan-de-gobierno/agua/>

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} Collins, Dan. "Will the new president's grand vision end Peru's water crisis?" *The Guardian*. October 25, 2016. Accessed October 27, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/oct/25/water-access-peru-president-kuczynski-ppk>

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- ix Angel, Miguel. "Historia del petróleo en el Peru Parte 2" *Petroblogger.com*. February 10, 2013. Accessed October 25, 2016. <http://www.ingenieriadepetroleo.com/historia-petroleo-peru-parte-2-resumen.html>
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