

Press Release

Destruction of Sierra de Bahoruco National Park Resumes

24 July 2018. Los Arroyos, Pedernales.

Months after the outgoing environment minister announced the Conservation Plan for Sierra de Bahoruco National Park, the largest terrestrial park in the Dominican Republic, today this park is threatened by new and improved roads for agribusiness, authorized by the same ministry. This roadwork will benefit commercial farmers illegally profiting from this protected area in Pedernales Province.

Yesterday, when Park authorities ordered a road grader machine to halt its work on a muddy, clandestine road in the park's southern flank, the promoter simply reached out for his cellphone and made a call. The promoter is Saturnino Espinal, a former senate candidate for the province, and the number he dialed was that of Angel Milcíades Medina, one of the brothers of the President of the Republic, Danilo Medina. Both men are allegedly friends and/or business partners in an onion crop plantation spanning more than 100 hectares. Saturnino put his friend on the speakerphone so that all those present, including some 300 Haitian farm workers and 6 Dominican farm owners could hear. Angel Milcíades asked who had ordered cessation of the work since it was "the president himself who had sent the road building equipment to the area." Local contacts later informed that the machines were sent by the National Commission for Provincial Development Support from the President's office.

With or without the involvement of the president's brother, after phone calls to two deputy ministers from the Ministry of the Environment, it soon became clear whose side the political power was on. The final order to the Provincial Environmental Director was to *immediately* authorize the continuation of the road work. And these graders seem to have a big workload ahead, judging by the amount of fuel that was brought up, indicated other local sources.

Pedernales environmentalists are deeply shocked. Fausto Gomera, president of the Pedernales Ecological Society, said it was very painful to see this happen, "only days after the President Danilo Medina's visit to Pedernales, in which he repeatedly said he would only support producers located *outside* the National Park. Commercial farmers have been increasingly advancing these roads across the Park's cloud forest ecosystem, the best for farmers as no irrigation systems are required. Thus, farmland has been increasingly expanding at the expense of the most water production and biodiversity rich forests of this island shared between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. All freshwater available in Pedernales is sourced from Pedernales River, whose headwaters originate in this precise area, in río Mulito. This includes the hydroelectric dam which supplies electricity to three local villages. Víctor Ferreras, local tourism entrepreneur, declared this was a "hard hit to Pedernales' residents, who dream about tourism development in their province as the very president has promised." Clearly, without plentiful and clean freshwater, these plans will not materialize. "Besides, those crops on the highlands don't benefit Pedernales' residents, only businessmen from outside the region and the cheap Haitian farmhands they hire", pointed out Marino José, from the Pedernales Ecotourism Cluster.

Currently almost 180 hectares of the park were planted with onions by Saturnino Espinal and Pilo Marte, two of the 14 commercial farmers whose incomes seem to be more important than the wellbeing of over 10,000 residents who desperately rely on the water captured in these montane forests. Besides onions, "there are around 900 hectares of parkland planted with export avocados," according to Yolanda León, from Grupo Jaragua, a conservation non profit that denounced this situation for years.

It seems these powerful farmers from Los Arroyos will be able to harvest and take to market many tons of onions in the coming days, fueling further farm expansion inside the park, while we are all robbed of one of the most important and valuable parks of our protected area national system.

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