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RADIO UPDATE: Why Prof Benach is talking about us in Toronto...

Previously the Environmental Safety Group talked about the Junta de Andalucía's recent implementation of legislation and measures designed to reduce emissions from heavy industries. The ESG warmly welcomed this positive development, for it could spell the beginning of a less polluting era for the Bay. However, with much public concern over the high levels of cancer in the area, the sceptic was left wondering whether it might in fact be too late – whether all these years of breathing polluted air have already taken their toll on the health of the people of the Bay area...

For years heavy industries have been polluting the region and despite some concern, the public remained largely uninformed of the exact nature of this pollution. Authorities on both sides of the border have been slow to address the issue and it was left up to the ESG and other concerned parties across the border to investigate further. This led to the development of the "Bay Bucket Brigade" who took samples of air both in Gibraltar and nearby Spain and sent them to America for analysis. The results gave much cause for concern as they indicated the presence of extremely high levels of benzene. Benzene is a known carcinogen and there is NO safe level of exposure to this chemical

A scientific study by Professor Benach and colleagues confirmed the gravity of the situation. They discovered that there was a striking cluster of high mortality in south-western Andalusia, with more people dying earlier and unexpected deaths (from cancer, for example) than anywhere else in Spain. For the Barcelona-based scientist and his colleagues, the results were indicative of a significant "public health crisis"... and although their study could not reveal the causes of this crisis, it seemed clear that further investigation was warranted.

-PAUSE-

Professor Benach has since worked closely with the ESG and other environmental NGO's in Spain. This summer he accompanied the ESG to Brussels to deliver a report to the European Commission which showed that there were unacceptably high levels of carcinogens and particulates in the air and also highlighted the high levels of premature deaths in the area.

At present, Professor Benach is attending a public health conference in Toronto, Canada, where he will be raising awareness of the public health crisis in south-western Andalusia. The title of his presentation will be "Community, professional and scientific collaboration for environmental and social justice in the South-west of Spain". This will include section on the specific problems in Gibraltar prepared for him by the ESG.

The presentation discusses the following issues:

- 1) Social inequalities and environmental injustice in Spain;*
- 2) The existence of a public health crisis in the south-west of Spain;*
- 3) The need for a multidisciplinary and participatory research approach; and*
- 4) The work of grassroots environmental movements, such as the ESG & Bay Bucket Brigade (which will include a peak at Gibraltar's social and economic history and the environmental issues we face today).*

Finally, while acknowledging that each community needs to generate local responses according to their specific environmental and social problems, the presentation highlights an important lesson. It states that, "since the persistence of environmental problems show that laws, administrative, and local interventions have not led to elimination of these problems,

building on grassroots support and community empowerment is a crucial public health necessity.”

Over the coming months, it is envisaged that the ESG will continue to work closely with Professor Benach in order to facilitate the necessary multidisciplinary and participatory research. Our first step, being a voluntary group, will be to try to secure funds to bring him down to Gibraltar... *and to this end corporate sponsors and donors would be most welcome*. We will keep the public informed of any progress. Bye for now.

* should / can we include?? *