

87% of the budget for 2007 will be allocated to pay building lease and salaries

SETENA gets entangled

- The institution is short of inspection vehicles and the pile of cases is over 2000 cases
- The Executive Branch is planning to restructure the department

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13/10/2006

The lack of financial resources, personnel, and inspection vehicles and the legal entanglement have taken the National Environmental Technical Secretariat (SETENA) to a knot that is tightening the permit process for different works and construction projects. Since the end of August, the Executive Branch formed a commission to make recommendations to reduce bureaucratic formalities and improve the institution's efficiency; however, the situation is so serious and a final proposal has not been made yet.

The problem has worsened as time passes. Congress has analyzed the budget for next year, but if a change is not implemented, SETENA will get about ¢259 millions, an amount that will mostly be spent on salaries and building lease.

An analysis conducted by LA REPUBLICA newspaper showed that if the expenditure plan for 2007 remains intact, efficiency levels can be compromised.

An example is inspection and compliance issues related to environmental impact assessments.

SETENA must conduct field inspections before issuing any agreement, and this means to move personnel to the construction site. These inspections mostly take place outside the metropolitan area.

Nevertheless, the budget item for fuel expenses for next year is ¢2.5 million. Considering that the institution has just five vehicles, it will be "entitled" to filling the tank of each vehicle approximately every three weeks plus expenses such as maintenance, oil change, or per diem for long-distance field trips.

Another item is office supplies. In this case, the allocated budget is ¢500.000 for the entire year to buy paper, pens, and printed material.

"SETENA has become a serious problem. The commission is working on the solution of problems, but there is still much to do in different areas," said Marco Vargas, Minister of Inter-institutional Coordination, who is personally in charge of this issue.

This situation has resulted in a serious problem regarding environmental permit formalities. In some cases, there has been some disagreement that has caused one-year delays to start different projects, such as the case of the mining company Crucitas, in San Carlos. A similar situation was experienced by a mine operating in Puntarenas.



La entrada en marcha de grandes proyectos atraviesa calvarios para la aprobación de los estudios ambientales. Un caso fue el ocurrido con la instalación de una mina en la zona de Puntarenas, cuyo proceso pasó un empedrado camino.

So far, the pile of files pending approval is over 2.000 cases that must be solved by around 50 employees, including white-collar and technical employees.

Even though there is supposedly a thirty-day deadline, SETENA takes an average of three months to do this, so there are not homogenous formalities.

FOTO: The

implementation of big projects is undergoing serious difficulties to get the approval for environmental impact assessments. A case in point is a mine located in Puntarenas, whose process has faced some stumbling blocks on the road.

The institution is demanding three basic changes. The first one is the punctuality of the environmental commission members and their commitment to solve problems on time, according to Jaime Molina, Vice-president for the Costa Rican Private Enterprise Association and Chamber Union.

Moreover, application forms need to be improved to achieve expeditious formalities.

The second change is related to resources, and the third is a readjustment of the institution's powers in order to avoid working on issues outside its scope and achieve homogeneity in case resolution, since, according to Molina, cases have failed differently even for the same project.

The government is aware of this issue, said Vargas, and they are working on a restructuring plan.

These changes entail adjustments in the standards and a detailed study to avoid leaving the door open to corruption and wrongful manipulation of environmental permits.

In the meantime, in 2007 there could be changes through a bill or the budget surplus in other institutions.

Moreover, the collection of fees per study will be approved; nevertheless, the amount to be charged is under study as to decide if it is going to be a percentage of the works or a fixed flat rate. The analysis is intended to determine the best way to prevent possible cases of corruption.

Besides permit formalities, SETENA has to process and investigate complaints regarding environmental damage, conduct field inspections, guarantee case resolution, develop environmental educational guides, and recommend actions to minimize the impact of any project on the environment.

CUADRO

Environmental Leak

Next year, 87.5% of SETENA budget resources will be spent on salaries and building lease; therefore, the institution will have budget limitations to invest in equipment, office furniture, and mainly in field trips for project inspection purposes.

Next year, the expenses for per diem purposes will not surpass ¢1.8 million and the expenses for fuel and lubricants will be just ¢2.5 million (figures are given in millions of colones)

Item	Amount	Percentage
Salaries		
Building lease		
Management services (security and others)		
Other services		
Utilities		
Office supplies and materials		
Current transfers 0.3		
Long-lasting assets (computer equipment and furniture)		
Total		

Source: Budget

Fuga ambiental

Un 87,5% de los recursos de Setena se iría el próximo año en pagos de salarios y el alquiler del edificio, con lo cual la entidad se ve limitada para invertir en equipos, mobiliario de oficinas y sobre todo realizar giras para examinar proyectos.

El pago de viáticos para el próximo año no superaría ¢1,8 millones, mientras que el pago de combustibles y lubricantes sería de solo ¢2,5 millones (cifras en millones de colones).

Rubro	Monto	Porcentaje
Salarios	160,7	62,0
Alquiler de edificio	66,0	25,4
Servicios de gestión (vigilancia y otros)	10,8	4,1
Otros servicios	6,7	2,5
Servicios públicos	6,0	2,3
Materiales y suministros de oficina	4,2	1,6
Transferencias corrientes 0,3	3,6	1,3
Bienes duraderos (equipo de cómputo y mobiliario)	1,0	0,3
Total	259,0	100,0

Fuente: presupuesto