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Punta Cana tourist operator to reduce solid waste production by 80% - Dominican R.

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Dominican Republic tourist operator Grupo Punta Cana expects to greatly reduce its solid waste production, as well as reap important economic benefits, with the implementation of a solid waste management program that covers all of its operations, the group's solid waste manager Víctor Ojeda told BNAmericas.

In addition to a hotel, several real estate properties, a shopping mall and golf courses, the group owns the Punta Cana international airport, which handles traffic to and from the tourist destination.

Called "Descarga Cero" (Zero Discharges), the program aims to dramatically lower the group's solid waste production, which is currently deposited at an open-air dump some 20km from the resort.

"We hope that by February 2009, we will only dump 20% of the current load generated by the group at the waste dump. This includes all our facilities: the airport, the hotel, the cabins, etc.," Ojeda said.

Ojeda added that, as a whole, the operator generates 10t/d of waste, and so far the program has brought residue levels down by 50%.

"The 20% goal can be surpassed but that depends on how well our waste separation scheme works," he said.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

"We have told all of our fellow operators of the need to raise brand value in the Dominican tourist industry," Ojeda said. "This involves maintaining environmental quality standards that are at least similar to the ones in the tourists' home countries."

"Secondly, we have invested US\$16bn in infrastructure works - such as tunnels and airports - which could be lost if, for some reason, the ecological balance of the ocean is degraded or the coral reefs disappear due to contamination from fecal material, for example," the executive said.

Ojeda said the operator pays a private firm US\$200,000/y to collect and transport the solid waste it produces.

However, the implementation of the program has saved the group US\$110,000 already this year.

"When we see we can avert risks to our operations with a small investment, the economic benefits of a program such as this are immense," he added.

THE SCHEME

Ojeda said the Punta Cana international airport currently has an incinerator, a 1,500m2 recycling plant, compacting machines and a 21m conveyor belt, among other equipment.

"We have invested around US\$2mn in this equipment so far," he said, adding: "Here we treat all the waste produced by airplanes arriving to Punta Cana, as well as the residues generated by the airport."

The executive added that the airport alone produces 4t/d of solid waste, while organic waste from food served on the arriving aircraft adds another 4t/d.

"We are designing a system to generate 230KWh/d of energy from that waste. In addition, we are treating fluids at our biodigester facility to produce some 200t/y of organic compost to replace the synthetic fertilizer we currently use on our golf courses," he said.

"In addition, December will see the start of a door-to-door waste collection and separation program in our resort's 1,000 housing units," he stated.

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