



“Lithium mining is water mining”: OPSAL members present analysis on the National Lithium Strategy in seminar organized by University of Antofagasta



On September 28, Ramón Balcázar and Rudecino Espíndola, members of the Plurinational Observatory of Andean Salt Flats (OPSAL, in Spanish), presented at the seminar “Challenges of the National Lithium Strategy”, organized by the University of Antofagasta.

The OPSAL representatives shared a presentation on corporate lobby and the capitalization of conflict through certifications and mining standards, as well as the problematic position of the Salar de Tara (Tara Salt Flat, Region of Atacama) as a new extractive frontier in the light of the new National Lithium Strategy presented by Gabriel Boric’s administration. Regarding the aforementioned strategy and the State’s role in the exploitation of lithium, Máximo Pacheco, president of the directory of Codelco (the National Copper Corporation), mentioned a possible public-private alliance between the State-owned company and SQM for the



implementation of the policy, emphasizing the control of lithium extraction in the Salar de Atacama (Atacama Salt Flat) by SQM from 2031.

“It’s problematic to think that SQM might remain as the holder of the exploitation rights in the salt flat, given that’s a company that not only violates environmental rights, but one that’s also involved in corruption. A company whose privatization is directly linked to the illegal businesses conducted by the Pinochet family during the dictatorship. Especially now, 50 years after the Coup D’état, we should be questioning the impunity regarding the company’s actions, especially with the current administration”, Ramón Balcázar stated.

On the National Lithium Strategy

During the presentation, both OPSAL members discussed the “Salt flats are not Mines, Salt Flats are Wetlands” statement, which collected more than 200 support signatures from networks, Indigenous communities and environmental organizations from Chile and the rest of the world. This statement was issued to communicate OPSAL’s worry about the National Lithium Strategy presented this 2023 by President Gabriel Boric’s administration.

One of the points highlighted by Espíndola, also member of the Toconao Indigenous community, was that “as Indigenous communities, we are calling for the effective application of Convention 169 of the ILO, which grants us the right to prior, free and informed consultation, and, at the same time, we have the right to say no to extractive projects that degrade our ways of life and our ecosystems. In this line, we also believe that the State of Chile must move towards the implementation of the Escazú Agreement, with binding public participation that not only includes indigenous peoples, but also all those communities that inhabit the territory.”

During his presentation, Maximo Pacheco mentioned that State-owned companies are in conversations with different communities from the Atacama, Maricunga and Pedernales salt flats in the Antofagasta and Atacama Regions, respectively. Nevertheless, according to denounces made by local organizations, these



conversations might be excluding communities that have different views regarding lithium extraction”, Balcázar explained.



“Green mining” certifications and standards

Another concern presented by the speakers was the current role of mining standards and certification initiatives (IRMA, ICMM or EITI), designed by mining companies, that are mentioned in the National Lithium Strategy as a form to tackle public participation (the intention of implementation of these was declared back in June 2023 by the then Mining Minister, Marcela Hernando), but whose implementation contradicts the aforementioned international conventions, including ILO 169 and Escazú Agreement.

“Just as an example, in terms of methodology, the certification process with SQM has included as community and NGO participation the conducting of only eight interviews in a territory where there are at least 21 indigenous communities



recognized by the State – not counting indigenous population that does not necessarily are represented by these communities - and around 11,000 inhabitants affected by different types of mining. The fact that SQM is mentioned as a ‘responsible’ and ‘sustainable’ company, is of a worrying lack of seriousness”, commented Balcázar, also the director of the Tantí (Seed) Foundation.

Tara Salt Flat as a new extractive frontier

At more than 4,000 meters above sea level, in the Los Flamencos National Reserve (Antofagasta Region), and very close to the triple border between Chile, Argentina and Bolivia, we can find the Tara Salt Flat, one of the places that might be targeted intervened by mineral extraction, according to the National Lithium Strategy.

Espíndola expressed his concerns pointing out that “extractivism, and the urge for destroying the salt flats are astonishing as the ones who come up with these projects have an absolute lack of knowledge of the territory we inhabit. That’s why, as the Community of Toconao, we are working on the creation of the first high-altitude research facility, in the very Puna, that allows us having more knowledge regarding the archeology and heritage. In places we have mapped, we have found ancient human settlements based around the Salt Flat”.

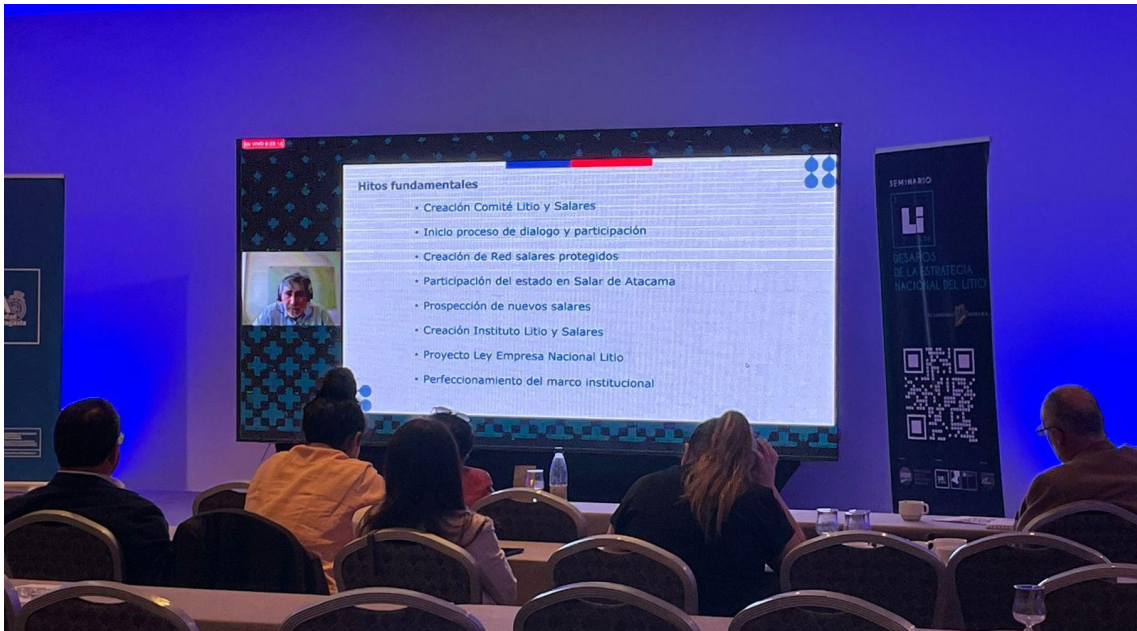
“Many people say that there’s no life in the desert, or that nothing exists there, but in the Quebrada de Soncor, where I work as a farmer, we can see that’s not the case. There is life, culture, and history, as we are part of the Lickanantay culture, and we’ve lived for more than 11,000 years around water, thus we can’t forget that lithium mining is water mining”, Espíndola added.



National Lithium Strategy: next steps

At the seminar, the University of Chile lecturer and consultant for lithium and salt flats at the Ministry of Mining, PhD. Gonzalo Gutiérrez, went through 8 milestones of the Strategy, such as the creation of a Lithium and Salt Flats Commission, the creation of a Protected Salt Flats Network, the improvement of the institutional framework, and the start of the dialogue and public participation process.

“We have decided to start a dialogue process with the ones involved in Lithium and Salt Flats: the civil society, the industry, universities, and Indigenous communities. It’s important to receive opinions, questions, and observations on the Strategy, because there will also be administrative actions. That will undoubtedly require an indigenous consultation. This is an early dialogue that does not replace the Indigenous consultation”, the government consultant stated.



We invite you to check [the complete seminar here.](#)