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Federal Government Offers Drought Assistance to Five Northern States

by LADB Staff

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In early May, the federal government announced the allocation of 710 million nuevo pesos (US \$121.3 million) in emergency assistance to five northern states affected by a severe drought over the past several weeks. The special assistance will be offered to farmers and ranchers in the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas, where rainfall has been 40% below average. All five states border Texas, where farmers in southern areas are also having to cope with drought conditions. The drought conditions have virtually devastated the agriculture industry in the five states, where losses as of the end of April were estimated at about 930 million nuevo pesos (US \$159 million).

According to some reports, most reservoirs in Coahuila state are at one-third of their normal levels, and some are almost entirely dry. The dry conditions have also affected most of the urban areas in the region. For example, authorities in Monterrey during the past several weeks have instituted a rationing system in order to conserve water. Other communities in the region have taken even more drastic measures, sometimes cutting off water service after midday.

The drought-related losses have compounded an already difficult economic situation for producers in the five states, which have faced skyrocketing prices for seed, fertilizers, and animal feed. In addition, loans have been extremely difficult to obtain, because of the large debt owed by farmers and interest rates that have often risen above 100%. According to some estimates, the dry conditions prevented farmers in the five northern states from planting almost 400,000 hectares of crops and killed more than 200,000 head of cattle. Estimates provided by the Agriculture Secretariat (SAGDR) indicate the drought has had the most severe impact on the ranching industry in Chihuahua, where 135,000 of the 200,000 cattle deaths have been reported.

The Monterrey daily newspaper *El Norte* reported cattle losses as high as 50,000 head in Durango state and about 10,000 head in Nuevo Leon state. As for crops, losses have been greatest in Tamaulipas, where farmers were unable to plant almost 250,000 hectares, mostly intended for wheat. Another 200,000 hectares of crop land in the state are endangered by lingering dry conditions. Beyond the immediate losses, many agricultural producers are concerned about the long-term implications of the drought. For example, Francisco Garcia Castel, president of a cattle producers organization in Coahuila (Union Ganadera Regional de Coahuila, UGRC) told the official news agency Notimex that drought could have a long-term devastating impact on the region's cattle ranching industry, since ranchers have been forced to sell a large part of their inventory, including cows they were counting on to produce calves.

Meantime, according to Agriculture Secretary Francisco Labastida Ochoa, the federal government's drought assistance plan announced in early May attempts to provide employment to agricultural producers affected by the drought while at the same time minimizing long-term problems created

by the dry conditions. The program, which is expected to benefit more than 3,200 rural communities, includes the creation of 150,000 temporary jobs for agricultural producers. The producers will be hired to perform such tasks as cleaning irrigation canals and repairing roads. Additionally, the government will take other direct steps to assist producers such as providing feed and nutritional supplements for livestock, and financial assistance for such needs as transportation of feed to farms. The program also attempts to address some of the long-term concerns for the region. For example, financing will be provided for communities to dig new wells, purchase farm equipment, and expand and improve irrigation and rural water systems.

The drought problems have extended beyond the five northern states bordering Texas into some areas of the adjoining states of Zacatecas and San Luis Potosi. According to estimates by the agricultural producers group Confederacion Nacional Campesina (CNC), the drought has decimated a total of 2,000 hectares of planted fields and pasture lands in San Luis Potosi. State CNC director Antonio Rivera Barron said the state stands to lose between 30% and 40% of its corn and bean harvest for the spring-summer cycle if the drought continues through mid-May. The combined crop of corn and beans in San Luis Potosi was originally forecast at 702,000 metric tons. Similarly, officials in Yucatan state have reported partial drought damage on 40,000 hectares, or almost one fourth of the land devoted to crops in the state. According to the officials, the drought is expected to reduce corn production in Yucatan by about one-fifth this year. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 4, reported at 5.85 nuevo pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: La Jornada, 04/19/95, 05/05/95; Associated Press, 04/26/95, 05/05/95; Notimex, 04/26/95, 05/05/95, 05/07/95)

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