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## **Extended Drought Could Decimate Crops, Livestock in North, Central Mexico**

*by LADB Staff*

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At the beginning of June, the Agriculture Secretariat (Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia y Desarrollo Rural, SAGDR) greatly raised its estimate on the extent of damage that a lingering drought in northern Mexico will cause to crops and livestock this year. In a report released in early June, the SAGDR projected that extreme dry conditions have prevented farmers in five northern states from planting 700,000 hectares of crops during the current spring-summer agricultural cycle. The latest SAGDR projection is almost twice as high as the preliminary forecast the agency released in early May, which indicated that drought would prevent farmers from planting about 400,000 ha. of crops.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Labastida told reporters he could not estimate the impact the drought would have on Mexico's total production of basic crops such as corn and beans this year. Nevertheless, Labastida insisted that Mexico would not face a food shortage, given the large stocks of corn, beans, and other basic goods in the hands of the government's national foodstuffs agency CONASUPO. On the other hand, notwithstanding the lack of an official estimate on production declines, the independent farm organization Movimiento Nacional de Organizaciones Economicas Campesinas did predict that this year's spring-summer output of basic grains will drop to about 6 million metric tons, down from earlier expectations of about 10 million MT. The drought has also caused significant deaths of cattle in northern Mexico. Estimates provided by the SAGDR indicate that drought-related losses to livestock producers in the region this year are expected to amount to 6 billion nuevo pesos (US\$975 million).

According to the cattle producers confederation (Confederacion Nacional Ganadera, CNG), the number of cattle deaths directly resulting from the drought has increased to more than 3,000 head, compared with about 2,000 as of early May. In fact, CNG director Gilberto Perez Castillo told reporters at the organization's annual meeting this year that total cattle numbers in Mexico will decline by 15% in 1995 due to the drought. Perez called on President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to increase the amount of money allotted under a special government assistance program, and to expand the number of states eligible to receive relief funds. The program, announced in May, allocated about 710 million nuevo pesos (US\$115 million) for drought relief in the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas (see SourceMex, 05/10/95).

Perez said cattle producers in parts of Baja California, Baja California Sur, Zacatecas, and Jalisco have also suffered severe losses and should be eligible for the program. Indeed, CNG representatives from those states and from the central state of Queretaro issued a statement urging the Zedillo administration to include them in the emergency drought program. "Do we have to wait until all our cattle die before an emergency is declared in our regions?" asked one of the representatives this year's CNG annual meeting. For cattle ranchers, the government's emergency

assistance program provides feed and nutritional supplements for livestock, and offers financial assistance for such needs as transportation of feed to farms. Additionally, the program creates temporary employment for farm workers who are unable to work at their normal jobs because of the drought. The producers will be hired to perform such tasks as cleaning irrigation canals and repairing roads. But CNG officials told reporters that the 710 million nuevo pesos originally allocated by the Zedillo administration for drought relief was so insignificant that states like Nuevo Leon have used up almost all of their allotment. He said another 3,000 head of cattle are at risk unless the government is able to come up with more assistance.

Beyond direct losses, Perez said cattle ranchers are also facing other problems, such as the loss of future production due to a heavy number of calf deaths. He said the inability of producers to fatten their cattle has led many to bring their animals to market, which caused a supply glut. "Everybody is looking to sell their calves now, which has saturated the market and has caused prices to fall sharply," he said. At the annual CNG meeting, delegates have also appealed to the Zedillo administration to take other steps such as seeking ways to lower interest rates on agricultural loans and implement policies that will allow the cattle industry to remain competitive with counterparts in the US and Canada.

Meantime, the drought prompted the Zedillo administration to ask the US and Texas governments for a loan of 81,000 acre- feet of water mostly from the Rio Grande and reservoirs formed by the river to help deal with the effects of the drought. The US State Department rejected the request on the grounds that this would worsen problems in southern Texas, which is also suffering from the lack of rain. Similarly, Texas Gov. George W. Bush said he told Zedillo he could not support a water loan because the water is the private property of water-rights holders in Texas. According to some estimates, as of late May, Mexico has used up all but about 3% of its allotted reserves for this year in Falcon Lake and Amistad Reservoir, two shared reservoirs on the Rio Grande. Texas still has about half its reserves left, which is apparently enough to last the state through the end of 1995.

The arrival of rain to northern Mexico in late May apparently did little to ease the crisis situation in Tamaulipas and Coahuila states. According to a report from the government's national water commission (Comision Nacional de Agua, CNA), supplies in reservoirs only increased slightly as of early June. The situation was especially critical in the northeastern region, where supplies for irrigation remained at 21% of capacity. In fact, in early June the CNA announced a reduction of 50% in the amount of water distributed for irrigation in 80 collective farms (ejidos) in Tamaulipas state. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on June 14, reported at 6.15 nuevo pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 05/18/95 El Financiero International, El Nacional, 05/22/95; La Jornada, 05/19/95, 05/23/95; Associated Press, 05/25/95; Excelsior, 06/05/95; Notimex, 05/23/95, 06/11/95; Reuter, 06/12/95; La Jornada, 05/30/95, 06/06/95, 06/09/95, 06/13/95)

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