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LADB Staff

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Northern Mexico Continues Under Grip of Extended Drought

by LADB Staff

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A large area of northern Mexico remains in the grip of a severe and extended drought, which has depleted water supplies in reservoirs and threatens large reductions in agricultural and livestock production this year. According to a report released in mid-February by the national water commission (Comision Nacional de Agua, CNA), this year will be the second-driest in history, surpassed only by 1953. The CNA report said Mexico's dams held only 22 billion cubic feet of water as of the beginning of this year, or slightly more than one-third of their total capacity of 59 billion cubic feet. The CNA report said seven northern states Chihuahua, Coahuila, Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, Durango, Sonora, and Sinaloa have not received adequate rainfall since 1993. However, agricultural producers in the region point out that some northern areas of Mexico have faced a shortage of moisture for four years.

The extent of the water shortage has varied from region to region, although authorities agree that all seven states are facing emergencies of one kind or another. One report, cited by the daily newspaper Excelsior, says more land in Coahuila and Chihuahua has turned into desert than any other state in Mexico. Meantime, a report released by the Chihuahua state regional livestock producers union (Union Ganadera Regional de Chihuahua) indicates that since 1990, the supply of water in dams in Chihuahua has dropped by 75%. Since the end of 1995, dams of Chihuahua have fallen to between 14% and 26% of capacity, according to the report. A separate study by the national commission on arid regions (Comision Nacional de Zonas Aridas, CONAZA) says that the eight major dams located in Coahuila state are currently holding only 17% to 20% of their full water capacity because of scarce rain in the last few years.

In Tamaulipas state in early March, Patricia Mendoza, director of the state's water operation system, warned that water supplies in the state are only sufficient to cover needs for this year, provided temperatures remain close to normal. Mendoza said the situation could be even worse if abnormally hot and dry conditions occur during the early part of the summer, which could deplete water supplies by June or July. Indeed, the extended drought has already led to disputes between some states. For example, Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon states remain entangled in a dispute over water rights in El Cuchillo Dam, which straddles both states. Similarly, Sonora and Sinaloa states are fighting for the water in the Huites Dam. The ongoing drought in the North is expected to cause a substantial drop in basic-grain production this year, which will, in turn, have significant repercussions on Mexico's total output.

Indeed, in late March, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Labastida Ochoa said the shortage of water in reservoirs and rivers prevented farmers in northern states and other parts of Mexico from planting 500,000 hectares of soybeans, sorghum, wheat, and corn. As a result of the reduction in planted area, Labastida said Mexico's total production of basic grains would decline by 2.5 million to 3 million metric tons this year. However, agriculture producers in northern states affected by the drought said

Labastida underestimated the reduction in planted area. They said a more realistic estimate of the irrigated area that will not be planted is close to 900,000 ha.

While the drought is expected to have a wide impact on agricultural production in the region as a whole, Chihuahua and Coahuila states could face especially severe problems. According to a report from Chihuahua's agriculture department, in the last two years the average farm yield in that state has fallen to between 100 kg. and 360 kg. per ha., far short of the average 1,000 kg. per ha. before the drought. For corn, the department said yields have dropped to 470 kg. per ha., compared with about 2,000 kg. before the drought. In Coahuila, agricultural authorities said the continued dry conditions over the past seven months will reduce the state's total production of basic grains by 65% this year. However, the report did not provide specific production estimates.

Labastida Ochoa said the reduction in crop production will force Mexico to import as much as 10 million MT of basic grains during 1996 in order to meet domestic needs. In contrast, Mexico's annual imports of basic grains in recent years have fluctuated between 7 million MT and 9 million MT. As part of the effort to increase domestic supplies of basic agricultural products, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration recently raised the estimate for corn imports for this year to about 4.1 million MT, up from 3.1 million MT previously. "We have increased the estimate to account for the reduced availability of corn from domestic sources during the first half of the year," said a confidential government report obtained by Reuter news service. The amount of corn imports, which are provided mostly by the US, could be larger if current trends continue.

According to the report, Mexico's corn imports as of the end of February stood at 867,000 MT, compared with only about 170,000 MT during the first two months of last year. For March, corn imports have been forecast at about 405,000 MT, compared with earlier estimates of only 136,000 MT. This means that corn imports for the first quarter of the year could approach 1.3 million MT, compared with only 307,000 MT in January-March of last year. The drought has also had a devastating effect on livestock production in northern states.

Since the end of 1993, cattle numbers have fallen from 2.2 million head to about 1.1 million. The reductions have been caused both by natural deaths due to heat or lack of water, as well as increased slaughter. According to the national livestock producers confederation (Confederacion Nacional Ganadera, CNG), ranchers were forced to sell 500,000 head of cattle to slaughterhouses prematurely at below market prices last year because they were unable to afford the cost of feed.

Additionally, the CNG said cattle deaths last year amounted to 1 million head because of a shortage of water or forage supplies. The devastation caused by the drought on agricultural production in northern Mexico has been compounded by severe financial problems for most producers in the region, many of whom have been unable to obtain new loans because of long- overdue debts. This problem has affected agricultural producers throughout Mexico but is becoming a severe constraint in the largest agricultural states such as Chihuahua and Sinaloa. According to Centro Bancario de Chihuahua, the total overdue debt for the state amounted to 4.8 billion pesos (US\$637 million). Without offering a breakdown, the report said almost every industrial sector, with the exception of the maquiladora industry, was facing severe debt problems. A high percentage of the debt is owed

by agricultural producers, since livestock ranching and agriculture are among Chihuahua's major industries.

Producers in Sinaloa state presented their case directly to President Zedillo, who visited the state in mid-March to examine drought damage in the state's agricultural areas. "We are not only facing a real drought but a credit drought," one producer told Zedillo. In response to the plea, the president promised that his administration would soon present a plan to further address the overdue debt of agricultural producers nationwide, although he did not offer specifics on the plan. Zedillo also pledged that his administration would allocate 106 million pesos (US\$14 million) through a special program to help offset the impact of the drought. He said this money would be in addition to the 120 million pesos (US\$15.9 million) that was originally destined for the Procampo program, which was set up under former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari to provide credit and direct assistance to farmers.

Much of the US\$15.9 million in Procampo funds have not been used because crops were not planted due to drought. "I cannot hide my strong concern about the drought that is affecting this region," said Zedillo. He pointed out that dams in Sinaloa stood only at 20% of capacity, which prevented the planting of 250,000 ha. in the state, or one-third of Sinaloa's total agricultural area. Still, the amounts pledged by Zedillo to support agricultural producers in the region, are small in comparison to the needs caused by the drought. Indeed, the administration continues to face severe criticism for implementing token or insufficient efforts to help the northern states deal with the impact of the drought.

Last year, President Zedillo implemented an emergency drought-relief program for five northern states, providing the equivalent of US\$121 million (see SourceMex, 05/10/95). The program provided feed and nutritional supplements for livestock, and financial assistance for such needs as transportation of feed to farms. Financing was provided for communities to dig new wells, purchase farm equipment, and expand and improve irrigation and rural water systems. The administration has yet to respond to pleas from the CNG and other groups to implement a similar program this year.

In its request to the administration, the CNG warned that unless the government takes immediate action to extend drought relief, Mexico could be facing a severe shortage of red meat by September. Gonzalez also urged the Agriculture Secretariat (SAGDR) to help livestock producers through a quicker release of US funds to replenish livestock herds. The funds were made available to Mexico by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) through a special program that offers credit guarantees for agricultural sales. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 26, reported at 7.53 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 02/15/96; Notimex, 03/12/96, 03/13/96; Excelsior, 02/08/96, 03/13/96, 03/15/96, 03/21/96; La Jornada, 02/20/96, 03/16/96, 03/21/96, 03/22/96)

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