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Experts Warn About Pending Water Shortages in Mexico

by LADB Staff

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According to recent reports from the Mexican government and multilateral organizations, Mexico is facing a shortage of fresh water because of overexploitation of existing aquifers and a lack of adequate infrastructure for water treatment and distribution. The most recent report, released by the World Bank in mid-July, said almost one-third of Mexico's 258 aquifers are in danger of running dry because water supplies are being used at a faster rate than they can be replenished. World Bank says danger greatest in 16 states The World Bank said the danger of water shortages is greatest in 16 states in northwestern, northern, and central Mexico.

According to the report, the water shortage has worsened over the past two decades, resulting in increased vulnerability to contamination from toxic substances or salt water. "The number of aquifers that qualify as 'overexploited' has grown from 32 in 1975 to 36 in 1981 to 80 at present," the World Bank said.

World Bank official Jose Simas urged the Mexican government to implement a system to regulate the usage and quality of the country's water supplies. According to Simas, a major problem is that untreated industrial and municipal waste is discharged into the waterways and eventually contaminates supplies in an aquifer. A separate study in late 1996 produced by the Secretaria de Recursos Naturales, Medio Ambiente y Pesca (SEMARNAP) also cautioned about the problems with water shortages.

Environment secretary urges more investment in water projects

In presenting the report, Environment Secretary Julia Carabias said almost 24 billion pesos (US \$3.07 billion) in investments are needed to meet urgent water-related infrastructure needs in priority regions such as Mexico City and surrounding areas, the US-Mexico border, and central and southern states. In the report, Carabias said Mexico faces two principal challenges, the efficient use of water and pollution control. "The reduction in water supplies in our country has become a serious problem," Carabias said. "The growing demand for water means that the problem could become even worse."

According to Carabias, Mexico is among the countries in the world with the largest number of dams. But the country is unable to use this capacity efficiently because a large percentage of the water is lost through leakage. Report says Mexico City could face severe shortage in 10 years A separate report produced by the Comision Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnologia (CONACYT) warned that Mexico City could be facing a severe water shortage within the next 10 years because of the rapid increase in population and the continued industrialization of the capital city. CONACYT and other organizations calculate that water is extracted from 647 wells near Mexico City at a rate of 50 cubic meters per second to meet the needs of 70% of the estimated 12 million residents of the capital. At the same time, the aquifer is only being recharged at a rate of 25 cubic meters per second, creating the potential for a severe water shortage in the near future.

Both the World Bank and the Mexican government recently announced programs to help address the problems of water shortages and contamination of water supplies. Earlier this month, the World Bank created a fund that provides matching funds for the government to develop water-related infrastructure and help improve the water quality. Financing will come from the bank's Water Resource Management Project.

Additionally, in late May, President Ernesto Zedillo announced the allocation of 7.14 billion pesos (US\$914.2 million) for water projects in Mexico during the coming year. According to Zedillo, the federal government's expenditures will help bring potable water to 10 million more Mexicans and sewer service to another 14 million. Zedillo said the government would place special emphasis on water treatment in the four most contaminated metropolitan areas in the country: Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Tijuana. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on July 23, reported at 7.81 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Novedades, 05/20/97; Excelsior, 10/24/96, 11/24/96, 05/20/97; El Universal, 05/20/97, 07/09/97, 07/14/97)

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