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LADB Staff

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## **Environment News Briefs: Fire Damage, Mexico City Garbage, PEMEX Sued**

by LADB Staff

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### *Fires cause massive destruction to forests, grasslands*

The Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) has declared a state of alert in various regions of Mexico, where fires are destroying thousands of hectares of forests and grasslands. SEMARNAP said the fires have caused the most damage to forests in Hidalgo, San Luis Potosi, Puebla, Michoacan, and Mexico states and the Federal District. Fires have also destroyed forests in Oaxaca, Jalisco, Chiapas, Veracruz, Tlaxcala, and Queretaro states.

SEMARNAP said the fires destroyed almost 9,000 ha between early January and mid-February, or almost three times the area affected by fires during the same period in 1997. As of mid-February, 65 separate fires had caused major damage to forests and grasslands in nine states. The statistics, however, were compiled before the outbreak of a fire along the Nuevo Leon- Coahuila border in late February, which destroyed 4,600 ha within a 48-hour period.

SEMARNAP said the fires are partly the result of El Nino, which has caused disproportionately dry conditions in some states and excessive moisture in others. "The northern and central areas of the country are a powder keg because cold temperatures dried up vegetation and grasslands," said Roberto Martinez Dominguez, deputy director of SEMARNAP's forestry division.

SEMARNAP expects more fires in the coming months. Members of the opposition Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) criticized President Ernesto Zedillo's administration for failing to take steps to minimize the fires. In a statement released in late February, the PVEM urged the government to take more decisive action to inform citizens about the gravity of the situation. "SEMARNAP has failed to develop a system of information and prevention to deal with the fires, which results from both natural causes and human carelessness," said the PVEM.

### *Report warns of problems with Mexico City garbage*

In a report published in late February, the civil protection commission in the Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal (ALDF) said solid waste produced daily by residents of Mexico City will increase to about 15,000 metric tons by the year 2000, and 24,000 MT by the year 2010. Commission chair Pablo Jaime Jimenez Barranco said the problem is exacerbated by inadequate waste-recycling programs. Jimenez said residents and businesses recycle only about one-third of the 11,000 MT of waste produced daily. "Unless we develop better ways to dispose of the waste, we could see serious and irreversible health problems among residents of the capital," said Jimenez.

Jimenez cited several geological and hydraulic studies commissioned by the Mexico City government, which showed almost no land within the Federal District to place new landfills that comply with the federal government's environmental regulations. Cesar Buenrostro, Mexico City's public works secretary, said Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas' administration is studying alternatives to recycle wastes for industrial use. The city has contracted with private companies to convert

cardboard, paper, glass, and other items into industrial products. "Several domestic and foreign companies have proposed to sell us state-of-the-art equipment to better manage our solid wastes," said Buenrostro.

### *Environmental group denounces PEMEX for Campeche oil spill*

The environmental organization Greenpeace is urging the state-run oil company PEMEX to take responsibility for an offshore oil spill that has damaged more than 200 km of beach along Campeche Sound. Greenpeace de Mexico spokesperson Alejandro Calvillo said PEMEX failed to take immediate action to deal with the spill, which occurred in early February. "PEMEX failed to use recovery methods that would have prevented an adverse impact on the area's marine life," said Calvillo.

Citing a study published by the Universidad Autonoma de Campeche, Greenpeace said the site of the spill in Laguna de Terminos has much higher concentrations of hydrocarbons than the 10 parts per billion allowed under international norms. "We want to denounce the total lack of environmental rights of citizens who have complaints about PEMEX," said Calvillo. "This firm has never acknowledged responsibility in the numerous accidents it has caused."

Members of the Campeche fisheries industry have filed a complaint against PEMEX with the Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Medio Ambiente (PROFEPA). The complaint said the oil spill contaminated 25 MT of shrimp. In response, PROFEPA initiated an investigation with the Secretaria de Marina and PEMEX to assess the spill's impact and determine appropriate action. PROFEPA promised a full report on the matter in March. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 02/13/98; La Jornada, 02/19/98, 02/21/98, 02/22/98; Excelsior, 02/20/98, 02/23/98; Notimex, El Diario de Yucatan, 02/23/98; The News, 02/25/98)

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