

4-15-1998

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## Recommended Citation

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## **Federal Budget Cuts Curtail Spending on Environmental Programs**

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1998-04-15

The government's recent decision to reduce the 1998 federal budget will cut funds available for environmental protection this year. In a press conference in early April, Environment Secretary Julia Carabias said President Ernesto Zedillo's administration will slash more than 250 million pesos (US \$29.5 million) from the Secretaria de Recursos Naturales, Medio Ambiente y Pesca (SEMARNAP) because of lower revenues projected for this year. In two separate budget cuts announced earlier this year, the government reduced planned federal expenditures for 1998 by US\$3 billion because of a decline in global oil prices (see SourceMex, 01/21/98 and 03/25/98).

### *Administration pledges support for key ecological programs*

Carabias did not offer specifics on the SEMARNAP budget reductions, which are expected to come mostly in administrative cuts. She said, however, the cuts will not affect SEMARNAP's efforts to address the country's worst environmental problems, which include deforestation, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, water and air pollution, and the overexploitation of fisheries resources. At the same time, she acknowledged that available financial resources are insufficient to address the country's massive environmental problems. "We have to make every effort to ration the available resources," Carabias said.

The secretary said three-fourths of SEMARNAP's 1998 budget will be allocated through the Comision Nacional del Agua (CNA), which provides water for 800,000 persons in agricultural areas. The remaining one-fourth will be divided into four priority areas: management of protected natural areas, disposal of dangerous waste, recovery of forest ecosystems, and management of fisheries activities. Carabias said the Zedillo administration will also maintain its commitment to provide about 12.5 billion pesos (US\$147.5 million) in direct assistance to marginalized groups, particularly indigenous communities in forests, jungles, and other areas with rich biological resources.

### *Severe forest-fire season could test budget goals*

The reduction in the SEMARNAP budget comes as Mexico is facing one of its worst seasons of forest and grass fires in history. At least 6,800 fires have been reported since the start of this year, damaging more than 140,000 hectares in the states of Oaxaca, Puebla, Mexico, Nuevo Leon, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Veracruz, Durango, and Chiapas. The losses in the first three months of the year equal those reported during all of 1997. In a recent report, the Movimiento Ecologista Mexicano (MEM) raised concerns that 1 million ha of forests and grasslands could be lost to fires this year, which would make this the worst fire season in 50 years.

Among the casualties is the Desierto de los Leones national park just outside Mexico City, where fires consumed more than 680 ha of forests and grasslands in early April. Smoke from the fires contributed to severe air pollution problems in Mexico City. Carabias attributed the proliferation of forest fires to extremely dry conditions caused by the El Nino weather phenomenon since late 1997.

She said the problems are aggravated by the heat and drought of the annual spring dry season and burning by farmers preparing land for planting. "We have not yet seen the full effect of the fires," said Carabias. "In the next six or eight weeks, we will probably see an increase in land lost to fire."

The environment secretary said only 10% of the fires are ignited by natural causes such as lightning. The other 90% are caused by human carelessness or by agricultural burning. Beyond the devastation caused by the forest fires, the lack of rain since late 1997 has caused a water-supply crisis in the northern and western states. In central Sinaloa state, authorities report the Abelardo Rodriguez reservoir is at 7% of capacity, leaving only a two-month water supply. Similarly, Jalisco state's Lake Chapala, one of the largest lakes in Mexico, was reported at only at 35% capacity in early April.

The country's extremely dry conditions cause concern for the upcoming growing season. About 2.5 million ha devoted to corn, beans, wheat, rice, and sorghum was abandoned last year because of poor weather conditions. Some agricultural and campesino organizations, anticipating even more severe drought-related losses this year, have urged SEMARNAP and the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia y Desarrollo Rural (SAGAR) to develop a plan to assist producers. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Apr. 15, reported at 8.47 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: El Nacional, El Universal, 04/02/98; Associated Press, 04/09/98; The Washington Post, 04/12/98; El Universal, 04/13/98; Excelsior, 04/02/98, 04/14/98; La Jornada, 04/14/98, 04/15/98)

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