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Environment News: Forest Fires, Mexico City Pollution, Nuclear Waste Storage

by LADB Staff

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Forest fires causing national crisis

Extremely dry conditions, combined with the traditional practice of burning to clear land to plant crops, has caused near-crisis conditions this fire season in Mexico. Fires have burned more than 220,000 hectares of forests and grasslands between early January and early May of this year, said the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP). SEMARNAP said the situation has worsened in the past several weeks as subsistence farmers have begun their annual burning to clear land for planting. About 80,000 ha of forests and grasslands have been lost to fires since early April.

While fires have affected most states in Mexico, problems are worse in the normally humid southeastern states, which have only received a fraction of their average precipitation. Under normal conditions, fires set by subsistence farmers are easily controlled. But this year, humidity in tropical forests has fallen to only 10%, while temperatures have remained at 35 degrees Celsius in recent weeks.

In Chiapas, tropical areas received only about .2 cm of rain in April, compared with 3.3 cm during a normal year. In some states, fires have also been blamed on marijuana and poppy producers and on drug traffickers. The daily newspaper Reforma, quoting local military commanders, said some marijuana and opium-poppy growers employ the same methods as subsistence farmers to clear land. "They do not make safety lines or take precautionary measures," Guerrero state regional commander Juan Oropeza said.

In Michoacan state, military spokesman Guillermo Galvan said drug traffickers have ignited fires as a diversionary tactic. "While we are combating the fire, the drug traffickers can move their merchandise much more easily," said Galvan.

The Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Medio Ambiente (PROFEPA) has set severe fines for any person convicted of starting a forest or grass fire. But PROFEPA has limited resources to investigate the cases, and many go unresolved, said agency director Antonio Azuela de la Cueva.

Meanwhile, Environment Secretary Julia Carabias was strongly criticized in Congress for minimizing the impact of the fires, particularly by members of opposition parties. In recent testimony before the Chamber of Deputies, Carabias said SEMARNAP was concerned about the severity of this year's fire season, but she also asked legislators not to panic because conditions fall "within historic parameters." The secretary said the damage so far this year was still short of the 500,000 ha destroyed during 1988-1989 season.

Carabias' statements angered Deputies Laura Itzel Castillo of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and Francisco Vera of the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). "SEMARNAP has to admit that the fires are serious," said Itzel Castillo. "The agency cannot avoid its responsibility by simply saying that the fires are within normal parameters." Both legislators took the opportunity to attack the President Ernesto Zedillo's administration's decision earlier this year to cut 250 million pesos (US\$29.3 million) from the 1998 budget on environmental programs (see SourceMex, 04/15/98) Homero Aridjis, a member of the respected environmental organization Grupo de los Cien, also urged the Zedillo administration not to be complacent regarding the fires because the already severe situation could become worse. In past instances of El Nino, said Aridjis, Mexico has experienced prolonged drought, and if that occurs, it could bring fires throughout the summer months.

Mexico City air pollution harms children

The high rate of air pollution in Mexico City is having significant ill effects on children in the capital. Two studies published in April indicate the high rate of contamination is affecting infants to school-age children. One study by environmental health researcher Margarita Castillejos of the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM) said high levels of industrial contaminants such as sulfur dioxide could contribute to high infant mortality in the southwestern areas of the city. Castillejos, who presented her findings at an international conference sponsored by the American Lung Association and the American Thoracic Society in Chicago, said a study of records of children under one year of age found an average of three deaths daily in southwestern areas of Mexico City between 1993 and 1995.

Castillejos said minute particles of sulfur dioxide and nitric dioxide blowing from industrial parks in the city have probably contributed to lung damage in infants, but other complications from polluted air could be contributing to the high death rates. "We are just analyzing these data," said Castillejos. A separate study presented by the Estudios del Centro de Investigaciones de Salud Poblacional said absenteeism increases significantly in Mexico City schools whenever ozone and lead concentrations remain excessive for two consecutive days. The study was presented to the city's legislative body, the Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal (ALDF). Jose Luis Benitez Gil, chairman of the ALDF's environmental committee, said high levels of lead in the atmosphere affect the pulmonary functions of residents of all ages.

In the case of school children, said Benitez Gil, high concentrations of lead have been proven to cause neurological damage and have had a direct effect on learning and cognitive functions. Benitez Gil urged Mexico City and federal authorities to take more comprehensive and drastic steps to deal with air contamination in the Mexican capital, including a reduction in the number of vehicles allowed to transit through the city and the imposition of severe penalties against industries that pollute the air. Air pollution, normally worse in the capital between November and February, has continued to be severe into May because of forest fires on the outskirts of the city. The fires have left smoke particles suspended over the city almost daily for much of this year. "Dry winds and high temperatures favor the concentration of such particles in the lower layers of the atmosphere," said Raul Rivera of the Servicio Meteorologico Nacional.

Texas governor pledges to re-examine nuclear storage site

Texas Gov. George W. Bush has promised to review a controversial plan to establish a nuclear-waste storage site in Sierra Blanca, Texas, about 22 km from the US-Mexico border. Environmental groups, Mexican and US legislators, and the Zedillo administration have staunchly opposed the installation of the toxic-waste dump since the project was first proposed in 1993. Sen. Luis Alvarez presented Bush with resolutions from the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, and the joint Senate-Chamber commission (Comision Permanente) opposing the nuclear dump site.

All three letters said Sierra Blanca created a serious risk of radioactive contamination for residents of the US-Mexico border area. Bush, who announced his position on the issue during a meeting with Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green in Mexico City, said his administration would thoroughly review plans for the proposed site to determine its impact on nearby residents. Bush did not offer clear opposition to the facility but he pledged his administration would oppose the site if it fails to meet the strictest safety guidelines. The Sierra Blanca site is a federally sponsored project, and its ultimate approval rests with the US Senate. However, the site must also receive approval from the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission.

In a statement in mid-May, SEMARNAP's international relations coordinator Jose Luis Samaniego criticized US President Bill Clinton's administration for refusing to consider Sierra Blanca within the context of side agreements on the environment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Earlier this year, Green wrote the Clinton administration to protest the Sierra Blanca project. Green sent the letter partly at the urging of the Comision de Ecologia y Medio Ambiente in the Chamber of Deputies, which asked the secretary to invoke environmental provisions of NAFTA and a 1983 US-Mexico environmental treaty that obligates both countries to cooperate on environmental protection along the US-Mexico border (see SourceMex, 01/28/98).

Samaniego said the US federal government has the power to prevent the installation of the Sierra Blanca facility, but appears to be passing this responsibility to the Texas government. And, despite Bush's commitment to review the project, said Samaniego, the Texas governor has shown no inclination to prevent the Sierra Blanca opening. (Sources: The News, 04/29/98; Houston Chronicle, 04/30/98; Reuter, 04/28/98, 05/06/98; Notimex, 05/04/98, 05/06/98; Novedades, 05/05/98, 05/06/98; Associated Press, 05/06/98; La Jornada, 04/29/98, 05/07/98; Excelsior, 05/04/98, 05/05/98, 05/08/98; El Universal, 05/13/98)

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