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Drought Threatens Crop, Livestock Production

by LADB Staff

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The Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia y Desarrollo Rural (SAGAR) is forecasting at least some crop and livestock losses this season because of the hot, dry weather that has enveloped the country since the beginning of the year. The drought has already reduced production of coffee, fruit, milk, poultry, and cattle in some southern and western states this year. But damage to crops and livestock could largely depend on the amount of rainfall during the coming weeks. The El Nino weather pattern, generally blamed for this year's hot and dry conditions, has delayed the start of the rainy season in Mexico by one or two weeks. The dry conditions, in turn, have delayed initial corn planting in the higher valleys in central Mexico.

In a press conference in early May, Agriculture Secretary Romarico Arroyo Marroquin said the dry conditions were certain to reduce Mexico's corn production for this year by at least 700,000 metric tons. Because of the drought, production of basic grains has been projected at only 29 million MT this season, a reduction of 4% relative to 1997, he said. If the rainy season arrives within a reasonable period, said Arroyo, the impact on corn production will be minimal. "We have sufficient grain in reserve to meet domestic demand for this year," he said.

Despite Arroyo's optimism, agricultural organizations and local and state SAGAR offices are sounding the alarm about the impact of the drought on various agricultural products. For example, the Union Nacional de Productores de Maiz (UNPM) acknowledged that direct losses for corn producers were still relatively small. But UNPM president Abel Castellanos urged the administration to prepare for possible severe losses if hot and dry conditions prevail during the planting season. "We risk losing our crops altogether," Castellanos said.

Producers selling cattle earlier than usual In mid-May, SAGAR's livestock-division director Ignacio Lastra Marin said continued hot, dry conditions could jeopardize almost two-thirds of the cattle in Mexico. Lastra said producers in many states have brought their cattle to market earlier than normal rather than risk losing them because of a lack of water and feed. About 625,000 cattle have been exported this year, an increase of about 37% from the same period last year, said Lastra. Some producers are also selling a percentage of their cattle to domestic slaughterhouses. About 20 million head of cattle have been brought to slaughter earlier than normal this year, said Cesar Gonzalez Quiroga, president of the Union Nacional Ganadera (UNG).vGonzalez Quiroga urged President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to approve special assistance for livestock producers.

The weather conditions have also caused severe problems for producers of dairy cattle and poultry. In Tabasco state, the drought has damaged about 409,000 hectares of pasture used by dairy-cattle producers. As a result, said local SAGAR delegate Gonzalo Lanestrosa Leon, milk production was running about 4 million liters below last year's levels. Poultry producers in Tabasco, Chihuahua, Sonora, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas states are also reporting significant poultry losses this year. As of mid-May, about 900,000 chickens had died because of extreme heat in the five states, causing

economic losses of 150 million pesos (US\$17.4 million). "We quantify losses both in numbers of deaths of chickens and in the loss of potential egg production," said Hector Manuel Martinez Cazares, president of the Asociacion de Avicultores de Monterrey.

Drought also having profound impact on coffee The drought is already having a severe impact on some export crops. For example, rainfall levels in Chiapas and other southern coffee-producing areas have been 40% below the previous all-time low. Alfredo Moises, president of the Confederacion de Productores de Cafe (CPC), said the drought probably reduced coffee production in Chiapas by at least 700,000 27-kg bags. "This is an alarming and difficult situation," Moises said. Some coffee producers in Tapachula in southwestern Chiapas have reported losses as high 100%. "These losses mean some producers cannot repay debts to banks and other financial institutions," said Herminio Verdugo Munoz, director of the Union Campesina Democratica (UCD).

Other major coffee-producing states such as Puebla and Veracruz are not as directly affected by the drought. However, high temperatures in Puebla have, in large measure, caused numerous forest and grass fires during the past several weeks. The slight increase in temperatures, said Moises, could reduce the productive capability of coffee trees in Puebla.

In Sinaloa, reservoirs have fallen to dangerously low levels, damaging many of the region's intensely irrigated fruit and vegetable crops. The low water levels could force state authorities to impose severe restrictions on irrigation, which could significantly reduce the state's tomato production. A large percentage of the tomatoes produced in Sinaloa are exported to the US market. Manuel de Jesus Ortiz, a meteorologist for the Confederacion de Asociaciones de Agricultores del Estado de Sinaloa (CAADES), said the arrival of the rainy season to western Mexico could still bring some relief to local producers, but rainfall will not be sufficient to raise water levels in reservoirs to normal levels.

Ortiz and other weather specialists said the state's low water level can only improve with heavy tropical storms and the hurricane season. "We generally anticipate a poor rainy season," said Ortiz. "Unless we have a good season of hurricanes or cyclones, the water in our reservoirs will not return to last year's levels." The federal Comision Nacional de Agua (CNA) estimates reservoirs in Mexico have fallen on average to 26% of capacity, or about 5 billion cubic meters below a year ago. The CNA said levels are lowest at reservoirs in central states, although the northeast and the northwest are also experiencing severe deficiencies. The CNA said recent studies by the University of Colorado and Creighton University suggest 26 tropical storms could form in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans this season. "This could help reverse the negative impact caused by El Nino," the CNA said.

But the impact of hurricanes on agriculture could be mixed. In October 1997, Hurricane Pauline caused severe damage to fruit, coffee, grain, and other crops in southeastern Mexico (see SourceMex, 10/22/97). Agricultural groups urge government to boost assistance Meanwhile, several groups representing small-scale producers are urging the Zedillo administration and Congress to take emergency actions to assist the agricultural sector. Victor Suarez, director of the Asociacion Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras del Sector Social (ANEC), warned that the recent drought could cause a food crisis in many rural areas.

Suarez said many small-scale producers will have little or no access to food this year because their production will be curtailed by drought. Similarly, the Comision Nacional Campesina (CNC) has asked the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to "find the necessary additional resources" to provide emergency assistance to agricultural producers. CNC director Beatriz Paredes, who is also a member of the Chamber of Deputies, said conditions require an increase in funds for emergency-assistance programs beyond the 332 million pesos (US\$38.5 million) approved for this year.

The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) also presented its recommendations to deal with the crisis, such as government subsidies for diesel and electricity for producers, and direct financial assistance to the agricultural sector. In a letter to the Zedillo administration, the agricultural affairs committee urged the administration to divert funds from the banking-sector rescue program to agricultural emergency needs. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 20, reported at 8.62 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Notimex, 04/23/98, 05/06/98; The News, 05/04/98, 05/13/98; Novedades, 05/13/98; Reuters, 05/11/98, 05/14/98; El Economista, 05/07/98, 05/12-15/98, 05/19/98; La Jornada, 05/11/98, 05/12/98, 05/19/98, 05/20/98; El Universal, 05/13/98, 05/18/98, 05/20/98; Excelsior, 05/20/98)

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