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## **Drought, Water Issues Come to the Forefront in 1999**

*by LADB Staff*

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The Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) and other federal government agencies are expected to face issues related to stewardship of the country's water resources again this year. At a press conference in early January, Environment Secretary Julia Carabias Lillo raised concerns about the growing problems with water contamination and water usage.

Speaking at the inauguration of a water treatment plant in Tlaxcala state, Carabias reported that 80% of Mexico's aquifers have been contaminated by industrial or urban wastes. She said a major problem for Mexico is the lack of infrastructure to treat waste water. "We are only able to handle about 24% of the industrial and urban waste," said Carabias. In the 1999 budget, the Chamber of Deputies approved President Ernesto Zedillo's proposal for a 5% increase in expenditures for SEMARNAP to about 13.3 billion pesos (US\$1.3 billion).

However, Carabias said only a portion of this increase will be devoted to water-treatment projects. Carabias said another problem that SEMARNAP must address in 1999 and in coming years is to find ways to replenish water, which is being extracted from rivers and aquifers in Mexico at a faster rate than is being replenished. She said the rapid extraction was not only creating a potential shortage for communities, but was also causing irreversible environmental damage. "This has damaged the flora and fauna in our ecosystems," said Carabias.

A separate study released by the Centro de Estudios del Sector Privado para el Desarrollo Sustentable (Cespedes) in early January said agricultural producers account for more than 60% of the contamination of Mexican waterways and aquifers through the misuse of pesticides and chemical fertilizers. The Cespedes report also noted a significant rate of water waste in the agriculture sector.

Speaking to reporters about the report, Cespedes director Gabriel Quadri said agricultural producers, who account for 83% of all water use in Mexico, end up wasting almost one-half of their allotment. Quadri said much of this water loss occurs because of inefficient irrigation systems, which result in large rates of evaporation. Mexico irrigates about 6 million hectares of land, or almost one-third of its total cultivated area of about 20 million ha. Irrigated fields account for about 55% of Mexico's agricultural production and about 70% of the country's agricultural exports.

In recent years, drought conditions have depleted water supplies in central and northern states, bringing some dams to dangerously low levels. Dry conditions devastated crops and killed off livestock in many central and northern states the last two years (see SourceMex, 10/29/97, 05/20/98, 08/05/98). Some drought conditions appear to be developing in some areas of northern Mexico again this year because of the impact of the weather phenomenon La Nina that has resulted in below-normal rainfall in northern states.

Some problems are already developing in Sinaloa state, where dams are at about 26% of capacity. In the North, the Adolfo Lopez Mateos reservoir is reported at a mere 11% of capacity, while the Sanalona Dam is only at 25%. Because of the reduced water levels at reservoirs in the state, Sinaloa agricultural producers will take about 280,000 ha. out of production on land that is normally irrigated during the spring-summer cycle, said spokespersons for the Asociacion Nacional de Usuarios de Riego (ANUR) and the Confederacion de Asociaciones Agricolas del Estado de Sinaloa (CAADES). [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Jan. 20, reported at 10.18 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: El Economista, 01/07/99; Excelsior, 01/12/99, 01/19/99)

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