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Drought Threatens Parts of Mexico Again this Year

by LADB Staff

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A lack of moisture during the winter months is threatening to worsen drought conditions in the North and in some southeastern states again this year. The dry weather has already sharply reduced water levels at reservoirs in Sinaloa, caused severe damage to some fruit orchards in Durango, and raised concerns about crop losses in Tabasco state. It has also increased the potential for forest and grass fires that could match or surpass last year's levels. The 1998 drought severely affected agriculture in northern states, particularly livestock and corn (see SourceMex, 1998-05-20 and 1998-08-05).

If a severe drought develops again this year, the federal government will have to reallocate revenues to provide massive aid from an already austere budget, which has been tightened because of continued low oil-export revenues (see SourceMex, 1999-01-06). The most dramatic evidence of drought so far this year is in Sinaloa state, where the Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE) had to temporarily shut down three hydroelectric plants because of a sharp decline in water levels.

CFE spokespersons said water levels at the three dams are about 30% below a year ago, when the state also had severe dry weather. The Comision Nacional del Agua (CNA), which monitors water levels at the country's major reservoirs, said the eleven major dams in Sinaloa are only at 21% of capacity. In Durango state, fruit growers are reporting some damage to orchards because of a lack of moisture during the winter months.

Juan Gabriel Saucedo, president of the Federacion Estatal de Productores Rurales (FEPR), reported premature damage to 2,500 hectares of fruit trees. Saucedo said yields on apple orchards in some parts of Durango are only about 2.47 metric tons per hectare, compared with about 7.15 MT per ha the previous year.

Early concerns about drought have not been limited to the northern states. In the southeastern state of Tabasco, some government officials have projected that drought conditions this year could surpass those of last year because of the very low rainfall in January. Gilberto Segobia, a CNA spokesperson in Tabasco, said dry conditions have already placed the state's corn, sorghum, and rice crops in extreme danger.

Concern also grows about fire season

Meanwhile, the dry conditions have renewed concerns about the coming fire season. In 1998, fires devastated close to 850,000 ha of forests and grasslands, caused in large part by the combination of drought and traditional agricultural practices (see SourceMex, 1998-05-13, 1998-10-21).

Attempting to prevent a repeat of last year's devastation, President Ernesto Zedillo issued an urgent plea to farmers to abandon the traditional method of clearing land for planting by setting fire to brush and other vegetation. "We cannot risk hundreds of acres simply to prepare a small plot of

land," Zedillo said in a speech in Oaxaca. The president pointed out that 98% of fires in Mexico last year were ignited by humans.

Still, Zedillo said the administration has allocated about 3.64 billion pesos (US\$365 million) for a special fund to combat forest and grassland fires and promote reforestation of devastated areas. "We must be prepared to face this adverse situation because the climatic conditions have not been favorable," Zedillo told reporters. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 3, reported at 9.95 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: El Universal, 02/05/99, 02/18/99; Novedades, 02/18/99, 02/22/99; Excelsior, 02/22/99, 02/25/99)

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