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LADB Staff

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## **Independent Senator Introduces Legislation to Promote Forest Conservation**

*by LADB Staff*

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In mid-April, Sen. Adolfo Aguilar Zinser announced an initiative to create an autonomous government agency, the Comision Nacional Forestal, to promote reforestation and conservation in Mexico. Aguilar Zinser, an independent legislator, said the proposal has been endorsed by the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the three opposition parties in the Senate.

Aguilar Zinser said a commission that is independent from the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) could enable the government to concentrate more effort on reforestation and forest conservation. "Deforestation is pushing us toward environmental collapse," said Aguilar Zinser. "The government should declare a national forestry disaster."

Aguilar Zinser said the new commission would be similar to the Comision Nacional de Agua (CNA), which handles the federal government's policies regarding water supply. In an interview with The New York Times, Aguilar said Mexico has destroyed half its forests in just 40 years. Unless this rate of destruction can be reversed, Mexico stands to lose its remaining forests within 50 years, he warned.

Aguilar Zinser said the new agency would give federal legislators an opportunity to push for more funds for forest conservation. Mexico's entire budget for all forest-related programs is only about US\$90 million, allowing for a limited number of inspectors to enforce forestry laws. Aguilar Zinser's proposal is one of a few efforts to address Mexico's rapidly growing deforestation problems.

With a tight budget for forest conservation, SEMARNAP focuses primarily on fighting forest fires and on maintaining the small amount of forest lands that have been designated as protected areas. At least 370,000 hectares of forest lost annually. The full extent of deforestation is unknown, although massive areas are being lost in all regions of Mexico. A recent SEMARNAP estimate indicated that an average of 370,000 ha of forest land have disappeared each year since 1980. But another study released by the Centro de Estudios del Sector Privado para el Desarrollo Sustentable (CESPEDES) said Mexico could be losing 500,000 ha to 1.5 million ha of forests annually.

While only a small percentage of the loss is attributed to fires, the CESPEDES report cited concerns about the growing rate of fire-related degradation of forests since 1970. On average, fires consume between 100,000 ha and 500,000 ha of forest land annually, said CESPEDES president Gabriel Quadri de la Torre. The vast majority of the forest fires are ignited by humans, either through ill-advised agricultural practices or through carelessness. Many subsistence farmers clear land by setting fire to brush, a practice that the government is trying to change.

In February of this year, SEMARNAP launched a sustainable-agriculture program to encourage subsistence farmers to prepare land by other means than fire. The program targets farmers residing near "critical" fire areas, representing about 310,000 ha of land. In years of extreme dry weather, fires to clear land often become difficult to control. Extremely dry conditions caused by the weather phenomenon El Nino resulted in the loss of at least 582,000 ha of forests and grasslands in 1998 (see SourceMex, 1998-05-13 and 1998-10-21).

The extremely dry conditions caused by El Nino last year have eased in some parts of the country, particularly the south and southeastern sections of Mexico. However, parts of northern and central Mexico remain extremely dry, with the potential for forest fires. Two of the most severe fires reported so far this year have occurred in the northern states of Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas and in the central state of Aguascalientes.

### *Illegal logging blamed for large forest losses*

Forest fires are only a small part of the problem of forest habitat. Leticia Merino, an anthropologist at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Cuernavaca, said illegal logging is "out of control." Merino, who is conducting a study on timber poaching, attributes some illegal cutting of trees to poor farmers who use the timber to build homes or to sell as firewood.

But Merino said private companies, with the assistance of corrupt local officials, are responsible for the largest share of illegal logging in Mexico. These companies, she said, often clear large sections of forests for commercial purposes. In addition, the government has been reluctant to implement restrictions to legal logging. "Mexico has different economic needs than developed countries," said SEMARNAP official Leonel Iglesias in an interview with the New York Times. "We need greater flexibility in our forest management."

The loss of forest land could be causing other environmental problems, including erosion. In some mountainous areas, the absence of trees to capture rainwater has created the potential for massive floods. Some environmental groups such as Grupo de los Cien are focusing their anti-deforestation campaigns on the implications for habitat loss. In mid-April, the Grupo de los Cien said the rapid loss of oyamel pines has endangered the monarch butterfly, which breeds in central and western Mexico after migrating from the US and Canada during the winter months.

In Chihuahua state, some indigenous communities have complained to federal environmental officials that illegal logging is destroying the habitat for such endangered species as the thick-billed parrot and the jaguarundi wildcat. But state officials have shrugged off those concerns. "If we were to restrict cutting forests wherever fauna is in danger, we'd risk being in the same situation as the US, where most forest lands are now off limits to logging," said SEMARNAP's Iglesias.

Mexico's deforestation problems can also be traced to the country's inconsistent forest policies over the past several decades. Under land reforms implemented in the 1930s, many indigenous communities gained control of 80% of Mexico forests. For years, these communities, organized in a way similar to the agricultural cooperative farms known as ejidos, assumed the responsibility of forest management and conservation.

But the government's forest policies began to change in recent decades, when ejido dwellers were encouraged to clear forests to graze cattle and plant crops. The most damaging change promoted by the government in recent years, however, has been to allow and even encourage ejidos to enter into timber-harvesting agreements with commercial logging companies. (Sources: Excelsior, 02/24/99; Novedades, 03/30/99; El Universal, 04/12/99, 04/23/99; Associated Press, 04/19/99, 04/27/99; The New York Times, 04/28/99; El Economista, 04/16/99, 05/05/99)

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