

5-3-2000

Agriculture Secretary Says Drought Conditions This Year Could Be The Worst Since The 1950s

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Agriculture Secretary Says Drought Conditions This Year Could Be The Worst Since The 1950s." (2000).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/4227>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Agriculture Secretary Says Drought Conditions This Year Could Be The Worst Since The 1950s

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2000-05-03

The Mexican government is preparing for the worst drought in about 50 years because of the lingering dry conditions in a wide area of the central and northern states. In some northern states like Durango, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, and Sonora, the dry conditions have lasted for the past four to five years. Preliminary estimates compiled by the government show the dry conditions could damage at least 1.5 million hectares of pastures, cropland, and forests this year. "You would have to go back to the 1950s to find a period as dry as this one," Agriculture Secretary Romarico Arroyo Marroquin told reporters in mid-April. Because of a lack of moisture during the winter months, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration allocated 1 billion pesos (US\$106 million) in February to help ranchers and agricultural producers take preventative steps (see SourceMex, February 23, 2000).

Emergency disaster declarations issued for 12 states

The administration followed up on that directive in April by issuing emergency disaster declarations for 12 central and northern states. That will allow the state governments of Aguascalientes, Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosi, Sonora, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Zacatecas, Queretaro, and Chihuahua to obtain additional funds from the federal government to assist crop and livestock producers and to fight forest fires. As part of the government's program to prepare for the drought, Interior Secretary Diodoro Carrasco met in March with representatives of 380 municipal governments in the states where drought conditions were expected. The Secretaria de Gobernación (SEGOB) has begun to allocate about 993 million pesos (US\$105.8 million) to these governments via the emergency program. SEGOB said the allocations are in addition to the 525 million pesos (US\$56 million) in emergency disaster funds available from three other government ministries. Despite the lingering drought conditions, Arroyo Marroquin has offered assurances that Mexico will produce sufficient basic foodstuffs this year to meet its domestic needs.

The government has not changed its projections for this year's production of grains and other basic food stuffs from earlier estimates of about 30 million metric tons. This output, which includes beans, corn, wheat, and rice, is the same as 1999. "In reference to basic grains, we will have sufficient supply to meet domestic demand," Arroyo said. But the Union Nacional de Productores de Maiz (UNPM) believes the government's assessment may be too optimistic. It says almost 800,000 ha of land normally devoted to corn has been damaged by droughts or floods, which could reduce this year's total corn production. The drought is expected to cause significant losses for cattle ranchers in northern states, which account for half the 17 million head of cattle produced in Mexico each year. Extensive damage has been reported to the pastures used by ranchers to graze their cattle. "The grasslands in our state are about 90% dry," said Eulalio Guerra, director of the Tamaulipas chapter of the Union Regional Ganadera (URG). "Producers in our state have been forced to sell older animals before they die." The situation is similar farther west in Durango state, where livestock

producers are reported to have prematurely slaughtered most of their herd of 350,000 head because their cattle cannot gain weight.

Authorities anticipate severe forest-fire season

Forest fires have also become a significant concern for the government, which expects damage to easily surpass the 230,000 ha recorded last year. The government expects the worst damage to occur between May and July. Some government officials fear the damage could reach the level recorded in 1998, when close to 500,000 ha of forests and grasslands were destroyed (see SourceMex, October 21, 1998). So far this year, the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) has received reports of at least 100 fires of varying sizes on a daily basis. "Dry trees combined with high temperatures have created the perfect fuel," said Environment and Fisheries Secretary Julia Carabias Lillo. Oscar Navarro Garate, coordinator of SEGOB's civil- protection division, said the government has allocated 160 million pesos (US\$17 million) for fire prevention and firefighting efforts this year. Among other things, the government is trying to reduce the number of fires ignited by humans. In most cases, these fires are started by subsistence farmers to clear land to plant their crops. Municipalities concerned about low water levels Roberto Meli Piraya, director of the Centro Nacional de Prevencion de Desastres (CENAPRED), said the drought could also disrupt electrical power to many central and northern cities because of low water levels at hydroelectric plants. In Sinaloa state, three of the six hydroelectric dams have already halted operations because of extremely low levels at 11 dams. Tomas Limon Gutierrez, an energy and water specialist for the Consejo de Camaras Industriales de Jalisco, said the reduced capacity at hydroelectric dams in the northwestern and central states will almost certainly result in blackouts in many major cities, including Guadalajara. The drought conditions have already caused some municipal and state governments to begin rationing water. In Chihuahua City, authorities have limited water service to eight hours daily. Similar restrictions have been imposed in Reynosa, Los Mochis, and other communities across the north. The drought has caused water-rights disputes among several primarily agricultural communities in Tamaulipas.

The daily newspaper Excelsior reports that tensions are growing among residents of the ejido-based communities of Llera, Padilla, and Guemes, with each claiming rights to the same limited amount of water. The drought has even been at the center of a US-Mexico dispute. Farmers in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas have asked the US government to force Mexico to supply water owed them under a longstanding treaty with the US. The farmers contend the water deficit has cost the regional economy hundreds of millions of dollars since 1992, when the shortages began. Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green acknowledges the claim by the US farmers is legitimate, but Mexico is not in a position to hand over the water because of the drought. Green said the issue will be discussed at the next round of bilateral talks among members of the Mexican and US cabinets. But she warned that Mexico will only comply with the treaty according to its abilities at the time. In some areas, the drought is having a long-term impact on the environment. Jorge Pio Monsivais, an engineering expert at the Universidad de Aguascalientes, said the city of Aguascalientes is extracting water from the subsoil at a greater rate than ever, which could cause a portion of the city to cave in. "We have to legislate the use of water and determine the depth, needs, and priorities," said Pio. The federal and state governments have begun to look at a variety of solutions to deal with the drought. In mid- April, the governments of San Luis Potosi, Aguascalientes, Tamaulipas, and Coahuila announced a 26 million peso (US\$2.7 million) joint project to seed clouds to create rain in

eastern and eastcentral Mexico. State officials reasoned this amount of money represents only 2% of the amount that the federal government has been forced to spend to deal with disasters in 1999. Authorities are also considering constructing water- desalinization plants as another solution to deal with water shortages. One such plant, inaugurated in Campeche state in late April, is expected to increase the area's water supply by almost one-third, said Gov. Antonio Gonzalez Curi. The plant, constructed at a cost of 35 million pesos (US\$3.7 million), was funded partially by the state-run oil company PEMEX. Drought conditions are also beginning to affect some southeastern states, including Campeche. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 3, reported at 9.38 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: El Financiero, 03/08/00, 03/09/00; The News, 03/14/00; The Dallas Morning News, 03/24/00; Associated Press, 04/10/00, 04/17/00; Reuters, 04/19/00; Reforma, 03/13/00, 04/18/00, 04/21/00, 04/25/00; La Jornada, 04/10/00, 04/18/00, 04/20/00, 04/21/00, 04/26/00; Notimex, 03/14/00, 03/23/00, 04/24/00, 04/27/00; Excelsior, 03/08/00, 03/13-15/00, 03/30/00, 04/04/00, 04/05/00, 04/18/00, 04/19/00, 04/21/00, 04/25-26/00; Novedades, 04/03/00, 04/05/00, 04/25/00, 04/28/00 El Universal, 03/10/00, 03/15/00, 03/22/00, 04/05/00, 04/11/00, 04/12/00, 04/28/00, 05/01/00, 05/02/00)

-- End --