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Disaster Agency Needs Increased Budget to Improve Emergency Response

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The Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) is planning to ask the Congress to double the amount of money allocated to the federal disaster-relief fund (Fondo Nacional de Desastres Naturales, FONDEN) for the next fiscal year to help the government meet the country's growing emergency needs.

Federal authorities expect difficulties in meeting all the requests that stem from this year's disasters, which were exacerbated by heavy rain in some northern and central areas of the country in September, followed by the convergence of three tropical storms in southern and central areas during the early part of October. "We want to convince the appropriate financial authorities and eventually the Congress that we need to double the amount of money in the fund to 6 billion (US $534 million) or even 7 billion pesos (US$623 million)," said Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda.

Some agriculture organizations are asking that increased disaster assistance be part of an expanded budget for agriculture during 2004. "In Michoacan alone, Tropical Storm Larry flooded more than 34,000 hectares," said Heladio Ramirez, president of the Confederacion Nacional Campesina (CNC). He said the FONDEN assistance of 300 million pesos (US$26.7 million) allocated for Michoacan was insufficient to compensate for the damage in the state.

**Tropical storms cause massive flooding in October**

Larry appears to have caused the most damage of the three tropical storms that hit Mexico in October, primarily affecting the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Michoacan, and Veracruz.

In Chiapas, Larry caused the Rio Sabinal and other rivers to flood, resulting in more than 500 billion pesos (US$44.5 billion) in damage. "The worst thing about flooding is that it tends to exacerbate poverty in some areas," said Chiapas Gov. Pablo Salazar Mendiguchea.

In addition to Larry, Tropical Storms Olaf and Nora brought rain to already soaked areas of central and northwest Mexico, also creating significant flood damage in some areas. Olaf caused major damage in the western coastal states after reaching hurricane strength and landing just south of the resort city of Puerto Vallarta in Jalisco state.

Another storm, Hurricane Patricia, was threatening to bring more flooding to northwestern Mexico in late October. As of late October, authorities had yet to complete an assessment of damage from Larry, Olaf, and Nora, although disaster areas were declared in many states. The heavy rain from Olaf and Nora came on top of intense storms in northern and central areas of Mexico in September.
Agriculture Secretary Javier Usabiaga said heavy rainfall during the month had already damaged an area containing 400,000 metric tons of corn, sorghum, and alfalfa, resulting in monetary damages totaling 600 million pesos (US$53.4 million) in the states of Guanajuato, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Puebla, Jalisco, and Nayarit. One benefit of the storms, however, was to significantly raise the water level at Lake Chapala in Jalisco, which had fallen to dangerously low levels (see SourceMex, 2001-06-27). The rain was raising water levels by about 3 million cubic meters per day, but the deficit was so large that the constant rain had only brought supplies in Lake Chapala to about half of capacity. The rain also brought much needed moisture to some parched regions and should benefit the fall crops for the 2003-2004 season, particularly orchards, said Usabiaga.

Water shortages also a problem

Still, the rain was considered a temporary reprieve for the extended drought that has gripped Mexico for many years (see SourceMex, 2000-10-11, 2002-04-17, 2003-04-02). The extended period of dry conditions, along with poor water management strategies, has left several dozen communities with very tight water supplies.

Rodolfo Tuiran, deputy secretary for urban development at the Secretaria de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL), said 63 of the 121 major cities in Mexico face "critical" or "very critical" water shortages and need to implement conservation measures, upgrade water treatment facilities, and protect threatened water supplies.

Tuiran recommended that the government control the growth of cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants to better absorb the flow of migration from the countryside. "If we do not carefully control the development of our cities and the number of people living in them, we are compromising the future of the country," Tuiran said.

Tuiran said the problem exists in almost all cities in central and northern Mexico, with water supplies especially tight in the metropolitan areas of Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, Tijuana, Leon, Ciudad Juarez, Toluca, Torreon, San Luis Potosi, Queretaro, Aguascalientes, Chihuahua, and Saltillo. Tuiran’s report was supported by the Comision Nacional del Agua (CONAGUA), which noted that the cities facing the crisis are home to almost half of Mexico’s population.

CONAGUA said, however, that the problems cannot be resolved unless the agency's budget is increased. "To reverse this problem, we need investments of 30 billion pesos (US$2.7 billion) annually through 2025," said CONAGUA director Jaime Jacquez. "Our annual budget is only 12 billion pesos (US$1.1 billion). Jacquez said Mexico is one of eight countries that has requested special financing from the European Union (EU) to construct water-related infrastructure. He said Mexico is seeking about US$9 billion.

Aging infrastructure and equipment is not only a problem in cities but also in the country's system of water storage. A recent report from CONAGUA said 67 of Mexico's 137 most important reservoirs are close to reaching the end of their useful life and will probably need to be replaced or restored in some manner. "We have to build more dams and improve our infrastructure, but we don't have any money," said Cesar Ramos, deputy director of hydraulic infrastructure at CONAGUA. High court
to hear Mexico state, Mexico City water dispute The water shortages have created tensions among some political entities.

The most prominent dispute is between Mexico state and Mexico City, whose water supplies are limited by obsolete infrastructure, rapidly growing population, and limited access to nearby water tables (see SourceMex, 1998-01-21 and 2001-06-27). The Mexican capital obtains a large share of its water from Mexico state, which has prompted the latter to demand compensation of 14 billion pesos (US$1.2 billion) either from the federal government, which is in the hands of the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), or from Mexico City, which is governed by the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

The administration of Mexico state Gov. Arturo Montiel contends that Mexico City's extraction of water from the Chiconautla and Alta Lerma water tables has been excessive. "It's not a question of politics," said Montiel of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "It's simply a legitimate claim against federal and municipal entities. We're not demanding anything that doesn't belong to us." The dispute, which has become a public battle between the Montiel government and the administration of Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, has gone as far as Mexico's highest court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN). The SCJN is scheduled to hear evidence from Mexico state and Mexico City on Nov. 26. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 22, reported at 11.23 pesos per US$1.00] (Sources: CNI en Linea, 09/05/03; La Cronica de Hoy, 09/14/03, 09/26/03; El Sol de Mexico, 09/26/03; Agence France-Presse, 10/06/03; Associated Press, 09/04/03, 10/07/03; Unomasuno, 10/08/03; The Herald, 09/08/03, 10/03/03, 10/06/03, 10/09/03; Notimex, 10/07/03, 10/09/03; La Jornada, 10/08/03, 10/13/03; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 10/14/03, 10/17/03; Notimex, 10/20/03; El Universal, 10/09/03, 10/10/03, 10/21/03; Milenio Diario, 09/18/03, 10/03/03, 10/07/03, 10/09/03, 10/22/03)

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