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Drought, Hurricane Damage Cause Fires in Northern, Southeast Mexico

by LADB Staff

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Extreme drought in northern states and the devastation caused by two major hurricanes in southern regions last year contributed to destruction of thousands of hectares of forests, jungle, and grasslands in Mexico this spring. The Comision Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR) said the number of fires reported this year is the fourth highest in history, although the total area damaged is not as large as some previous years.

Almost 7,000 fires were reported at the end of May, said CONAFOR, an autonomous agency that answers to the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT). CONAFOR and SEMARNAT officials project more than 14,000 fires in Mexico during the entire year, compared with the recent annual average of 10,000 fires since 1998. Fires had destroyed about 210,000 ha of land as of the end of May, with damage kept to a minimum because of the rapid response by local, state, and federal authorities.

In contrast, Mexico suffered one of its worst fire seasons in 1998, when about 800,000 ha were destroyed, said CONAFOR director Manuel Reed Segovia. The fires that year were caused in part by a severe drought, considered one of the worst in Mexican history (see SourceMex, 1998-05-13, 1998-0520 and 1998-08-05). While fires this year have affected almost every state in Mexico, the problems have been most prevalent in the northern states, which are experiencing severe drought, and in the southeastern states, which have yet to recover from the effects of Hurricanes Emily, Stan, and Wilma in 2005 (see SourceMex, 2005-10-12, 2005-11-02 and 2005-11-09).

North records high temperatures, scarce moisture

Dry conditions have been most devastating to the northern states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Sonora, and Sinaloa, and to a lesser extent Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon. Environment Secretary Jose Luis Luege Tamargo said fires had destroyed almost 140,000 ha of land in the northern states as of May, with the greatest damage inflicted on Coahuila, Durango, and Chihuahua. Coahuila alone reported damage to more than 22,000 ha, surpassing its record of 14,000 ha set in 1998. Chihuahua has suffered major drought conditions in 13 of the last 14 years, with the only exception occurring in 1994.

Conditions are already dire this year, with moisture totals far below normal levels during the winter months, said Victor Manuel Reyes, director of the Centro de Investigacion Sobre Sequia de Chihuahua (CISS). Only 10 of the 26 measuring stations established by the Comision Nacional de Agua (CONAGUA) in Chihuahua reported rain in March. "And there was no rain reported anywhere during April," said Reyes.

The lack of moisture in Chihuahua prompted the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) to declare a disaster emergency for 23 municipalities in the state, allowing local authorities access to federal

funds through the Fondo Nacional de Desastres Naturales (FONDEN). "The funds provided via FONDEN will allow local authorities to attend to the food, clothing, and health needs of the population affected by this disaster," said SEGOB.

In Coahuila and Durango, authorities are concerned about the damage to the cattle industry, which has lost thousands of hectares of grassland to dry conditions and fire. State agriculture officials have been distributing a feed supplement to cattle producers to help keep their cattle alive during the extreme drought.

Damage from fires has not been as devastating in the Pacific states of Sonora and Sinaloa as it has been in the interior states. Drought conditions have created major problems in the two-state area, however, with reservoirs beginning to drop significantly. "The aquifers in the region have begun to dry up because of the lack of rain," said the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*. "In Mazatlan [Sinaloa state], the water that is reaching some households is filled with mud residues and cannot be used even for bathing."

Hermosillo, one of the largest cities in Sonora, is experiencing its worst crisis in history, with water shortages occurring frequently. Cristobal Jaime Jaquez, director of the federal Comision Nacional del Agua (CNA), said some of the problems in Hermosillo would be solved with the completion of Los Bagotes reservoir, but the project won't be completed for three years. Even so, said Jaquez, the new reservoir is not sufficient to meet the city's water needs, and authorities will have to purchase more water rights from area agricultural interests or construct a water desalination plant for seawater. "We are in the midst of a crisis," said Jaquez. "The region is experiencing a very serious problem, with many wells drying up."

The acquisition of water rights from agricultural interests may be a difficult proposition because producers also need the water in the ongoing drought. Sonora and Sinaloa are among the country's top producers of fruits and vegetables, relying extensively on irrigation (see *SourceMex*, 2004-04-14). The drought-related problems for agriculture are not confined to the northern regions, but also extend to states in the center of the country like San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, Queretaro, and Tlaxcala. Dry conditions are also causing significant damage to crops in southern states like Michoacan, Oaxaca, and Quintana Roo, said the Confederacion Nacional Campesina (CNC), which reports that 100,000 ha of cropland throughout the country have been decimated by the drought.

Felled trees create tinderbox in Yucatan Peninsula

The Yucatan Peninsula, which suffered considerable devastation from Hurricane Wilma, also accounted for a significant number of fires. By some estimates, more than 20,000 ha of forests and grasslands had burned in Quintana Roo state as of the end of May.

Authorities said the trees felled by the hurricanes, combined with human carelessness, contributed to the fire problems. Very few of the fires were caused by lightning but rather by human activity, whether it was farmers clearing land to plant their crops or individuals who carelessly dropped a match or a lit cigarette near the vulnerable areas. "The fires were caused primarily by carelessness and negligence," said Eduardo Cruz, who is in charge of fire logistics in Quintana Roo state.

CONAFOR acknowledged that it failed to meet its goal to remove 60 million metric tons of wood felled by Hurricanes Wilma and Stan in Yucatan, Quintana Roo, and Chiapas. By some estimates, more than 864,000 ha of forests were affected by the two hurricanes, in addition to the damage caused by Hurricane Emily earlier in July. The hurricanes left a great amount of organic material, such as leaves, branches, and trees on the ground. "This is a huge amount of fuel stored under the jungles, representing more than 65 MT per ha," said Reed. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 03/10/06; Excelsior, 04/21/06, 04/25/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 03/10/06, 03/13/06, 05/04/06; Notimex, 05/16/06, 05/18/06; La Jornada, 02/17/06, 03/03/06, 03/07/06, 03/14/06, 03/21/06, 03/24/06, 04/05/06, 04/11/06, 05/11/06, 05/16/06, 05/19/06, 05/22/06, 05/25/06; TV Azteca, 05/29/06; El Universal, 02/13/06, 03/06/06, 03/28/06, 05/04/06, 05/11/06, 05/12/06, 05/26/06, 05/29/06, 05/30/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 02/28/06, 04/10/06, 05/30/06; El Siglo de Torreon, Tiempo La Noticia Digital-Chihuahua, 05/31/06; Reforma, 02/14/06, 03/14/06, 03/23/06, 04/11/06, 04/20/06, 05/04/06, 05/10/06, 05/21/06, 05/22/06, 05/29/06, 06/05/06; Frontenet Juarez, 06/03/06, 06/05/06)

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