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Fire Season Already Severe In Early 2008, Expected To Get Worse

The number of forest and grassland fires in Mexico in the first three months of 2008 is already far worse than it was during the same period last year, and the situation could worsen during coming months. The Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) is projecting that this will be the hottest April in 100 years, which will increase the possibility of fires throughout the country. A report published by SEMARNAT's Comision Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR) said more than 3,880 fires were reported in Mexico during January-March, three times the number recorded in January-March 2007.

In a report published in early April, CONAFOR said this year's fires have burned almost 54,000 hectares. CONAFOR director Jose Cibrian blamed the increase in fires on high temperatures, low humidity, and high winds, which came at a time when subsistence farmers were beginning to clear land for planting by burning off trees and vegetation. The dry conditions this year are similar to patterns in recent years, which also resulted in massive losses of woodlands and grasslands (SourceMex, May 03, 2000, April 02, 2003, May 04, 2005, and June 07, 2006).

The CONAFOR report said the fires happened throughout the country, but five entities Mexico state, the Federal District, Michoacan, Puebla, and Jalisco states sustained the most damage to forest areas. In Mexico state, authorities said, the number of fires reported in the first two months of the year was already four times higher than it was in January-February 2007. And in Michoacan state, the Comision Forestal de Michoacan (COFOM) said the number of fires reported thus far this year was already the highest in the last five years. Other states in central Mexico, including Tlaxcala, Morelos, Veracruz, and Hidalgo, have also suffered significant damage from fires, as have the southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas.

Additionally, there were major problems in northern states, with a huge fire in the Sierra de Santiago in Nuevo Leon state at the end of March destroying 4,000 ha of forests and even damaging a portion of the community of Santiago. The fire was so large that it took 815 firefighters from various state and federal agencies to place it under control. The fire caused more than 50 million pesos (US$4.7 million) in damage in the area, said Santiago mayor Rafael Paz. The hot and dry conditions that caused the huge fire in Nuevo Leon also caused several fires in neighboring Coahuila state, where authorities have already reported major damage in the first three months of the year.

Government increases budget for fire contingencies this year

Environment Secretary Rafael Elvira Quesada said SEMARNAT has set aside a large budget to fight fires because of the expected increased severity of this year's fire season. The agency will spend...
about 450 million pesos (US$42.5 million) to fight fires this year, an increase of 50 million pesos (US$4.7 million) from 2007. Elvira raised concerns about the forecasts for low humidity and extreme heat this spring, which could create a fire emergency worse than the one in 1998 (SourceMex, May 13, 1998). "We anticipate very little rain and extremely high temperatures, which will make this April a very critical month," said the environment secretary. Elvira expressed particular concern about southeastern Mexico, especially the state of Quintana Roo, which still has large areas of felled trees as a result of Hurricanes Emily, Stan, and Wilma in 2005 (SourceMex, October 12, 2005, November 02, 2005, November 09, 2005).

States surrounding Quintana Roo also face significant fire danger because of the 2005 hurricanes and the prevalence of dry conditions. The Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior said the regions of Frailesca, Costa, Soconusco, and Selva in Chiapas state are especially in danger of major fires. In a related report released in early March, the Comision Nacional de Agua (CONAGUA) said the prospects for more devastating hurricanes in the Yucatan Peninsula are high because of a warming of the Earth's temperature. "One cannot deny that the level of the ocean has increased," said Michael Rosengaus, a weather expert with the Servicio Meteorologico Nacional (SMN), "and this situation could have dire consequences for the Yucatan Peninsula." Citing the CONAGUA report, Rosengaus acknowledged that the conditions could result in increased moisture in the Yucatan Peninsula.

The rain would not arrive until the summer months, however, leaving the region vulnerable to fires in the short term. Furthermore, the devastation caused by future hurricanes could replicate the tinderbox conditions that have left the forests vulnerable to fires in southeastern Mexico. Even as southeastern Mexico becomes wetter in the summer months, hot and dry conditions are expected to prevail in the central and northern areas of the country for the foreseeable future, said Rosengaus. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on April 9, reported at 10.57 pesos per US$1.00]