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Government Imposes Water Rationing In Mexico City Metropolitan Area To Promote Conservation

by LADB Staff

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The Mexico City government and the federal water agency, facing a possible water deficit in the Mexican capital, decided in January to impose a rationing plan to conserve local supplies through at least May. The move will leave residents of the capital and several adjoining communities in Mexico state without the vital liquid during extended weekends. The water shortage is not confined to Mexico City. The most recent data released by the federal government indicates that 10 million Mexicans lack access to potable water. Water cut off for parts of weekend through at least May Under the plan imposed by the administration of Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard and the Comision Nacional de Agua (CONAGUA), authorities will shut off or reduce water supplies for limited periods each weekend to 10 boroughs in Mexico City and 11 adjoining municipalities in Mexico state.

Full service will be restored to the affected neighborhoods on Tuesdays through Thursdays. The measure, which affects more than one-quarter of the city's 20 million residents, will remain in place until at least the beginning of May, which is usually the start of the rainy season in the Valley of Mexico. The decision will have an impact on a cross-section of neighborhoods, from the densely populated poor delegations of Iztapalapa and Iztacalco to the mostly middle class areas of Colonia del Valle and Coyoacan to the affluent neighborhoods of Lomas de Chapultepec. CONAGUA officials predict that the rationing could save about 10 million cubic meters of water.

The decision reflects a reality that has been developing in the sprawling Mexican capital for many years. The steady population growth to about 20 million, combined with the depletion of nearby waterways and obsolete infrastructure, has put extreme pressure on the city's water supplies for the past several decades. In 1997, CONAGUA released a report warning that the Mexican capital could face severe shortages in a decade if authorities did not take sufficient steps to conserve water (SourceMex, July 23, 1997). The rationing plan announced by Ebrard and CONAGUA seems to at least partially confirm the predictions. Jorge Efren Villalon Figaredo, the CONAGUA official in charge of the Valley of Mexico, said the decision to impose emergency measures is based on a sharp drop in water levels in the Cutzamala-dam system, which has dipped below 60% of capacity, the lowest in 16 years. The reservoir, which is normally at 75% of capacity, accounts for 20% of the water used in Mexico City and the surrounding area. "We are running out of water," Villalon said in a radio interview. Officials blame the water drop on a sharp reduction in rain in the Valley of Mexico. "This year, the amount of rainfall in the area diminished significantly," said Javier Ramirez, head of the Cutzamala water system. "It wasn't enough to fill the dams.

In past years, the general water level of the dam system had gone up a little bit, but this year it was really scarce." But officials emphasize that the emergency measures are intended to prevent a difficult situation down the road and not a reaction to a current crisis. "The city will not suffer what you could call a water crisis," said Ramon Aguirre of the Mexico City water department. "We

will have 85% of the water we would normally receive." Water waste a big problem Others are proposing that the local and federal governments use the situation to promote a stronger culture of conservation among residents of the Mexico City metropolitan area. Daniel Salazar, a member of the Mexico City legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF), pointed out that residents of the capital use 50% more water than they actually need. "Let's hope that we put our resources to creating a greater awareness among the population," said Salazar. CONAGUA officials agreed, saying that rationing was just one piece of the puzzle and that conservation and investments in infrastructure were needed as part of a long-term solution.

As part of the conservation effort, Ebrard announced a series of steps that include stiff fines for wasting water and a campaign to reduce consumption in all city government offices by 20%. For now, the proposals will not include increased fees, thanks to strong lobbying from the ALDF and Ebrard. In a meeting with CONAGO, city officials argued that a rate increase would hurt the poor disproportionately. CONAGO director Jose Luis Luege Tamargo agreed not to pursue a fee increase this year but also criticized the Mexico City government and the ALDF for politicizing the issue ahead of the July congressional and gubernatorial elections. "Promising to cancel debts and not raise fees is easy," said Luege. "Anyone can win elections that way." Citing a need to "find a balance between fees and consumption," the CONAGO director said there is room to increase fees in Mexico City, which are about 2 to 3 pesos (US\$0.14 to US\$0.20) per cubic meter. In contrast, fees are as high as 16 pesos (US\$1.10) in Aguascalientes and 12 pesos (US\$0.83) in Monterrey.

Luege Tamargo insisted that a fee increase would not only promote conservation but also give the government additional resources to make improvements in areas where water is scarce or of poor quality. "We have a situation where poor communities have to hire a tanker truck to bring in water at a cost above 100 pesos (US\$6.92) per cubic meter," said Luege. In addition to a lack of precipitation, Mexico's water problems are linked to deficient infrastructure and poor planning in both urban and rural areas. A common problem is leaky pipelines, but there is also a need in many communities to upgrade or replace facilities such as aqueducts and treatment plants. Experts say another complication is the lack of foresight by local authorities, which have allowed construction projects in areas that are suited for catching runoff and replenishing aquifers. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Feb. 4, 2009, reported at 14.45 pesos per US\$1.00].

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