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Auditor Reports Severe Deficiencies In President Felipe Calderon Administration's Reforestation Program

by LADB Staff

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With much fanfare, President Felipe Calderon's administration launched its Proarbol campaign in 2007 as a major effort that would begin to restore Mexico's forest resources. Two years later, the administration has reluctantly accepted assessments by the congressional auditor (Auditoria Superior de la Federacion, ASF) and environmental groups like Greenpeace that the program has fallen considerably short of its goals during its first year of operation and has been riddled with corruption and mismanagement. The report prompted the resignation of Jose Cibrian Tovar, director of the Comision Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR), the agency in charge of administering Proarbol. The Calderon government launched the Proarbol campaign in March 2007 shortly after the UN sounded the alarm about Mexico's high rate of deforestation, one of the highest in the world (SourceMex, March 21, 2007).

In its campaign, the administration committed to the UN Environment Program (UNEP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to spend the equivalent of US\$150 million annually to promote tree planting in Mexico. Planting targets fall short, most trees die. In a report released in early March 2009, the ASF made data available only for 2007, the first year of the campaign, but environmental organizations say the situation has not improved and may have even worsened. In its report, the ASF noted that the administration had not only fallen short of its target to repopulate 400,000 hectares in Mexico with trees during the first year of the program but that at least half the plantings were not trees but plants that were part of the cactus family.

To make matters worse, the ASF report supported claims from environmental organizations like Greenpeace that only a percentage of the trees that were planted actually survived. In a report released in late 2008, Greenpeace said that roughly three-quarters of the plantings in a 10-month period died shortly after being placed in the ground. "This policy is based on an erroneous strategy," Hector Magallon Larson, director of Greenpeace's forests campaign, said at a rally in Mexico City's Zocalo square in November. Greenpeace was joined at the rally by representatives of forest cooperatives from the states of Jalisco, Chihuahua, Puebla, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Morelos, and Nuevo Leon. In addition to poor management by the Calderon administration, Greenpeace Mexico also faulted the Mexican Congress for devoting more of the national budget to supporting private tree plantations instead of allocating the funds to groups that promote sustainable management of forest resources.

The environmental organization Pronatura, which was asked by the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) last year to evaluate the Proarbol program, said the lack of follow-up was a principal reason for the high percentage of trees that died after they were planted. Many of the trees were planted in areas that suffered from drought, said the organization. Mismanagement, fraud also alleged. In its report, the ASF also presented serious administrative

irregularities, including manipulation and alteration of data and a lack of oversight of funds provided to states for forest recovery efforts. T

he ASF, which presented the report to the Chamber of Deputies, said the numbers were manipulated to try to give the impression that the government was meeting the targets promised to the UNEP. "Of the 713 plots targeted for reforestation, only 10% received verification visits," said the ASF. The congressional audit agency noted examples of other violations, such as CONAFOR's failure to properly report the disbursement of 518,000 pesos (US\$37, 000) in supports given to participants for changing the terms of their land use and the lack of follow-up on 21 million pesos (US\$1.5 million) disbursed as part of the Proarbol program. The enrollment agreements that CONAFOR subscribed with beneficiaries were incorrectly recorded and the supports were monitored in a deficient manner," said the ASF.

The ASF's highly critical report prompted CONAFOR director Cibrian Tovar, a biologist, to resign, leaving the agency's administration to associate director Carlos Rodriguez Combeller. Cibrian Tovar said the failure to meet the goals promised to the UN were partly the result of difficult climatic conditions. Rodriguez Combeller immediately announced that there would be adjustments to the manner in which Proarbol is administered, but it would continue operating under current guidelines. He said CONAFOR would closely examine all the ASF's conclusions related to the program, including operations and procedures. Environment Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada downplayed Cibrian Tovar's resignation, saying his departure was just a natural attrition experienced by any institution.

The environment secretary told reporters that, even though Proarbol had not met its goals, the program was working well and could eventually increase the rate of reforestation in Mexico, which could contribute to the country's efforts to fight global climate change. Former environment secretary defends program Others, such as former environment secretary Julia Carabias, acknowledged that Proarbol had failed to meet its targets but also defended the program. "In my opinion, Proarbol is the best comprehensive program of forest policy that we have had in Mexico," Carabias wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "There are mechanisms for conservation, restoration of forest ecosystems, and the strengthening of capacity and competitiveness of organizations that make a living from the forest. Carabias said another advantage of Proarbol is that it has the direct support of the Office of the Presidency and access to unprecedented financial resources. "Supports will be provided to the legitimate owners of the forest ecosystems, which should benefit millions of Mexicans," said the former environment secretary, who served in the early years of former President Ernesto Zedillo's administration.

Still other experts suggested that the government should respond more energetically in promoting reforestation, especially in urban areas. "The loss of green areas and forested zones in the most populated cities in our country is not only having a severe negative environmental impact but is also having an adverse psychological effect on the population," said Lorena Martinez Gonzalez, a researcher at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). Martinez said the large urban areas should devote an average of 9 meters of green area per inhabitant. "Unfortunately, urban development is coming at the expense of the environment," she said. She pointed out that pests, vandalism, and contamination are also responsible for the loss of green areas in Mexico City,

Guadalajara, Monterrey, and other cities in Mexico. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 18, 2009, reported at 13.93 pesos per US\$1.00]

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