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Mexico Faces Worst Dry Spell In 40 Years; Crop, Livestock Production Threatened In Many Areas

by LADB Staff

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Mexico is facing its worst dry spell in 40 years, a situation that is threatening the country's crop and livestock production and ultimately its food security. The drought, which has affected almost all regions of Mexico, has already caused irreparable damage to more than 1.5 million hectares of cropland. Meteorologists say the dry conditions are tied in part to global climate change and the advent of the weather phenomenon El Nino, which tends to significantly reduce rainfall in Mexico.

While Mexico has emerged from droughts in the past, there is concern that the recent dry spell may signal the beginning of a turn for the worse for the country's agricultural areas. The dry conditions are affecting some areas more than others, with the worst symptoms evident in the northeast (Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas), the southern coastal states on the Pacific Ocean, from Colima to Chiapas to the Yucatan Peninsula, and the central highlands, including the Valley of Mexico, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas. Conditions were already bad early in the year because precipitation had been spotty in previous months. But the extreme dry conditions during July might have doomed a lot of Mexico's crop production.

Weather specialists say Mexico received about 99.1 millimeters (3.9 inches) of rain in July, making it the second-driest July since records were first kept in 1941. The dry conditions in July are attributed in part to the advent of El Nino. The warming of the waters in the Pacific ultimately reduces the amount of precipitation in Mexico. The Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada reports that the dry conditions have caused irreparable damage to slightly more than 1.5 million ha of crops in the states of Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Hidalgo, Queretaro, Nuevo Leon, Durango, Aguascalientes, Michoacan, Campeche, Veracruz, and Morelos. Another 809,000 ha of crops in Tamaulipas, Yucatan, Puebla, Sinaloa, Morelos, and Mexico states are in danger if rains do not arrive soon. Authorities also report the death of at least 16,800 head of cattle in Yucatan, Tamaulipas, Campeche, and other states because of extreme heat and a lack of forage. "Despite the serious situation, supports by state authorities and the Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA) have been minimal," said La Jornada.

Central states sound the alarm Farmers in Guanajuato, who are not used to experiencing such extreme conditions, are warning that 785,000 ha of crops are at risk, including 35,000 ha of vegetables, if conditions remain dry. Some agricultural producers in Guanajuato asked state authorities to release water from local dams earlier than normal to allow them to save their crops. Pastures are also dry, leaving ranchers in states like Guanajuato no alternative but to dispose of their cattle. Near the city of Leon in Guanajuato, ranchers have had to sell as much 12% of their herds. "People are selling their livestock because they know they won't have enough feed in the coming days," said Juan Carlos Perez Hernandez, director of a local livestock-producers association. "Feed accounts for about 60% of the cost of raising livestock," said Perez Hernandez, whose customers are primarily in Jalisco, Nuevo Leon, Tlaxcala, and Mexico states. The situation is similar further north

in Zacatecas, where dry conditions have prevented farmers from planting as much as 35% of the surface normally devoted to nonirrigated crops.

Angelica Casillas Martinez, the state executive director for the Comision Nacional de Agua (CNA), said corn, beans, sorghum, and wheat are among the crops that could be lost. Zacatecas, one of the country's leading producers of beans, has lost crops to extreme dry conditions in past years (SourceMex, October 29, 1997). In the Valley of Mexico, which includes Mexico City, crops are also in danger because of drought. But one of the biggest concerns is the steady decline in water levels in the Cutzamala system, which supplies Mexico City. As one of the efforts to address a possible water crisis in the future, Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard launched a program to upgrade infrastructure in areas of the city where pipeline leakages are most common.

The Ebrard administration said the area where repairs are needed spans about 727 km. Successive city and federal administrations have developed plans to conserve water in the capital (SourceMex, June 27, 2001), but replacement of infrastructure has been slow and conservation efforts have had little success. "About 40% of the potable water is still wasted," said Felipe Gonzalez, a spokesperson for the federal water commission (Comision Nacional del Agua, CONAGUA). "In Mexico City and the Valley of Mexico, we still don't have systems in place to recover or reuse water." Some officials warn that Mexico City and surrounding areas could face a serious water crisis in 2010 and beyond if the Cutzamala system continues to dry up. The system serves 20 million people in Mexico City and surrounding areas.

Ramon Aguirre, director of Mexico City's water system (Sistema de Aguas de la Ciudad de Mexico, SACM), notes that the extremely dry conditions this year in the Valley of Mexico could put the city in a bind in 2010. "This could create a very difficult situation because our reservoirs are already at historically low levels," said Aguirre. Members of the Mexico City legislature said they agree that the situation is serious, with ALDF member Daniel Salazar pointing to predictions that the capital could find itself with an extremely serious water shortage by 2012.

Southeast also suffering from extreme dry conditions

Drought conditions are also hitting the southeast hard, with the scarcity of water attributed to the absence of rain from tropical cyclones. CONAGUA said the arrival of the first tropical storm to the Atlantic Ocean had not been delayed this long since 1990. Authorities say rainfall in Tabasco state during July was about 63% below the average for the month. The situation has not only put local agricultural production in peril but has significantly reduced reservoir levels and raised the danger of grass and forest fires. The low reservoirs could affect the ability of local utilities to provide electricity for the population.

One of the biggest sources, the Malpaso hydroelectric dam, is about 5.73 meters below feasible levels. Reservoirs in other regions are also significantly below normal. In Tamaulipas state, for example, the Pedro Jose Mendez and Ramiro Caballero reservoirs have fallen to about one-third of their capacity. The lack of rain has also helped foster dry winds in the southeastern areas of Tabasco. "Temperatures of 40 degrees Celsius [104 degrees Fahrenheit] have dried up vegetation and promoted fires in grasslands and brush lands," said Mexico City daily El Universal.

In neighboring Yucatan, close to 3,000 ha of corn and grasslands have fallen victim to the lack of regular rainfall. The area has been affected not only by a mostly dry July but also from drier-than-normal conditions early in the year. Rainfall during July amounted to 47.5 mm, about one-third the normal 140.5 mm. Authorities are especially concerned about the threat to corn production in the southern and eastern areas of the state.

Experts warn about dire long-term prospects

Weather specialists say the prospects are not good for the near term, with the impact of El Nino expected to limit rainfall in Mexico for the rest of 2009 and into 2010. "In Mexico, El Nino is going to reduce the amount of rain throughout the country this summer," the Servicio Meteorologico Nacional (SMN) said in a report July 16. Experts say this year's EL Nino could be as severe as or more severe than those in 1982 and 1997. "The first one caused drought, forest fires, and a decline in the fisheries industry," said El Universal. "The second one cost our country about US\$2 billion in losses to agriculture, livestock production, and fisheries." Beyond the immediate future, however, experts are sounding the alarm about adverse weather conditions in Mexico over the long term.

Guillermo Ramirez, a weather expert at Universidad Autonoma Chapingo (UACH), said global warming could be turning a large portion of Mexican territory into desert. He said that almost 99% of Mexican territory is susceptible to desertification in the next several years. He pointed to statistics from the Instituto Nacional de Ecologia (INE), which indicated that 48% of the national territory was already in grave danger of becoming desert. "There are several alarming studies that show that, within a period of 25 years, several ecosystems in our country will collapse, agriculture will experience a crisis, and several cities will halt their growth and development because of a lack of water," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Sol de Mexico. The newspaper said water availability is uneven in Mexico, with the southern and southeastern areas typically having surpluses, while the northern areas commonly suffer shortages.

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