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Forecasts Of High Temperatures, Dry Conditions Could Bring Severe Fire Season In Mexico

by LADB Staff

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Mexico could face a surge in the number of forest fires in May and June as a result of El Niño weather phenomenon and global climate warming. The national weather service (Servicio Meteorológico Nacional, SMN) is projecting extremely high temperatures and drought conditions during May and June in a wide area of the country, which increases the danger of fires. The heat and dry conditions also come when many small-scale farmers and ranchers around the country begin to clear land for planting by starting fires to remove dead vegetation.

The SMN said the extreme heat is expected primarily in the northern, southern, and southeastern regions of the country during May and June, with dangerous heat waves accompanied by a lack of rain. SMN coordinator Adrián Vázquez Gálvez said temperatures in these regions could average about 4 degrees Celsius (7 degrees Fahrenheit) above normal. For example, he said, temperatures will range between 34 and 36 degrees Celsius (93 to 97 degrees Fahrenheit) in the Yucatán Peninsula and 35 to 40 degrees Celsius (95 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit) in Sonora and Baja California states. Mexican authorities are extremely concerned about weather conditions this year, which are affected by the appearance of El Niño. "We are coming into a critical period for forest fires," Rafael Morales Soto, an official at the Comisión Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR), said in mid-March. "Beginning in April, May, and June, we expect a large number of fires because of climactic conditions and because this is the traditional start of preparations for the planting season."

Weather experts agree that the impact of El Niño, which results from warming waters in the Pacific Ocean, could also affect Mexico in the coming months. The weather phenomenon usually increases rainfall over the northern states during the winter and spring periods, but reduces precipitation elsewhere in the country. Many scientists are beginning to see a possible link between global climate change and the increased frequency in the appearance of El Niño in recent years.

The weather phenomenon has traditionally appeared every five years on average, although the span could be anywhere from three to seven years. "Some researchers suggest that global climate change might be behind the frequency of El Niño in the past 20 years," the Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) said in a report released in 2002. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) notes the change in the global climate is not the direct cause of El Niño, since there is evidence that the weather phenomenon has been around for centuries. "However, it has been hypothesized that warmer global sea surface temperatures can enhance the El Niño phenomenon, and it is also true that El Niños have been more frequent and intense in recent decades," said NOAA. The SMN forecasts have prompted CONAFOR to prepare for a prolonged period of dry weather, which could last through much of the summer months. "We have to prepare ourselves for a season of forest fires that is exacerbated by climate change," said SEMARNAT.

Critics urge government to launch comprehensive prevention campaign Mexican authorities are not yet projecting potential losses from fire in 2010, although the area lost to fire thus far is far below levels for recent years. In a report released on April 24, CONAFOR reported fire damage on only 16,000 hectares around the country between January and late April. The dry conditions and the potential for fire have prompted CONAFOR and the Comisión Nacional de Recursos Naturales (CORENA) to launch campaigns to educate the public to prevent forest fires. Special educational campaigns were organized ahead of the popular Easter Week vacation period in March and during the international commemoration of Earth day in late April.

The campaign during Easter Week primarily targeted campers and hikers. "It is important to make the population aware about the causes of fires and to participate in prevention efforts," said Environment Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada. Elvira said SEMARNAT has allocated 11 helicopters for Jalisco, Michoacán, Morelos, México state, Puebla, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo during the fire season. Despite the government's educational campaigns, the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) fears that the areas damaged by fire could surpass last year's levels because of the high temperatures and dry conditions that have been forecast for the next several months.

In 2009, Mexico lost about 296,000 ha of forests, jungles, and grasslands to fire. The PVEM suggested that the government's prevention efforts are insufficient given the looming dangers. Citing a SEMARNAT report, the PVEM noted that 90% of the fires in Mexico are caused by humans and only 10% are the result of natural causes. PVEM spokesperson Jesús Sesma Suárez pointed to the need for CONAFOR to concentrate prevention efforts on an intense campaign to educate agricultural producers about the dangers of using fire to clear brush and dead trees ahead of the planting season. The commission should pay special attention to vulnerable areas like Zacatecas, Jalisco, Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Tlaxcala, Chiapas, Puebla, Michoacán, and México states, and the Federal District. "Not everyone who uses fire for this purpose employs adequate methods," said Sesma. "On many occasions, the fire goes out of control and damages surrounding vegetation." Sesma noted that the fires are causing long-term damage to the environment.

Citing an article in the magazine *Science*, the PVEM spokesperson said fires around the world in 1998 contributed significantly to an increase in substances like methane, carbon dioxide, and carbon monoxide in the atmosphere. That year, fires devastated about 500,000 ha of forests and grasslands in a wide area of Mexico (SourceMex, May 13, 1998 and October 21, 1998).

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