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## President Felipe Calderón Launches Plan to Ensure Water Sustainability through 2030

by Carlos Navarro

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With a warning that some areas of Mexico are as parched as some countries in northern Africa, President Felipe Calderón announced a long-term plan to stem a potential water shortage in coming years. The plan, Agenda del Agua 2030, is a combination of infrastructure upgrades, environmental-protection measures, and a campaign to encourage citizens to practice conservation. A campaign goal is to ensure that all communities in Mexico have access to water by 2030. But some skeptics questioned the true motives of the government, saying that the proposals to attract private capital to some of the projects would be equivalent to turning over Mexico's water resources to the private sector.

Calderón unveiled his vision for Mexico's water sustainability on March 24 during a ceremony in Mexico City to observe World Water Day. In an event attended by dozens of governors, mayors, and federal legislators, the Mexican president stressed the urgent need to act. "Mexico went from a country with abundant water resources to one facing hydrological stress, even to the level of some countries in northern Africa," said the Mexican president, who was also accompanied by Environment Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada and José Luis Luege Tamargo, director of the Comisión Nacional del Agua (CONAGUA).

Concerns about potential water shortages have prevailed in Mexico for at least a decade ([SourceMex, June 27, 2001](#)) and ([May 29, 2002](#)).

Calderón offered assurances that the water plan was the result of a series of consultations with academics, representatives of the private sector and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and officials from all levels of government. "[This agenda] contains the voice of everyone," he said.

### *Aquifers overexploited*

The Mexican president alluded to a recent CONAGUA report, which said that 100 of the country's 650 major aquifers are overexploited, including several that provide water to Mexico City and surrounding areas. As an example, he mentioned the Texcoco aquifer, which supplies water to the Mexico City area and is considered one of the most overexploited in the country. Others aquifers under stress, he said, are in El Bajío region in Guanajuato and Queretaro states; La Laguna, near the border of Durango and Coahuila states; and Morelia in Michoacán state.

Calderón said his administration considers creating a system to ensure water sustainability a national-security matter, and this is spelled out in the plans for national development (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo) and water usage (Programa Nacional Hídrico). "We have made every effort to give a high priority to water concerns," said the president.

In announcing Agenda del Agua 2030, Calderón listed five objectives: 1) guarantee that all Mexicans have access to potable water and sewerage; 2) treat and reuse all residual waters; 3) ensure sufficient water for the manufacturing and productive sector; 4) ensure that water is used in the most efficient

manner and develop a system of fair payments for consumption; 5) preserve all the country's aquifers, rivers, and lakes.

To attain these goals, the federal, state, and local governments would commit about 145 billion pesos (US\$12.1 billion) to repair, expand, and construct water-related infrastructure. "It is clear that we have to reach the goal of treating 100% of wastewater in the current decade," said the president.

Calderón said the allocations he has proposed are more than twice what was invested in the first four years of the administration of former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and three times the total allocated during the government of ex-President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). "Even so, I believe the total [we are committing] is inadequate," said the president.

The Congress came out strongly in support of the president's plan. Deputy Agustín Torres Ibarrola, who chairs the environment and natural resources committee (Comisión de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales) in the lower house, said the plan forces Mexico to make important structural changes that will ensure the country's water sustainability.

Torres Ibarrola, a member of Calderón's Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), noted that Congress has already approved measures that support the president's plan, including passing reforms to the national water law (Ley de Aguas Nacionales). Among other things, the reforms give the government the legal instruments to combat overexploitation of aquifers.

Other legislators suggested that Mexico's water policies should go a step further. The Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) introduced a proposal in the Chamber of Deputies urging the other parties in Congress to support a motion to make access to water a constitutional right.

Mariana Boy Tamborell, the PVEM's secretary for environmental issues, said the government must act decisively in the face of a growing emergency. "In only 56 years, Mexico went from having an ample 18,000 cubic meters per inhabitant to 4,416 meters, which has created a very delicate situation," said the PVEM official. She warned that it would become increasingly difficult to guarantee water distribution, making it impossible to ensure that there is enough water to cover the needs of the population.

If approved, the measure would prevent any actions or activities that restrict or deny access to potable water. In other words, no one would be denied access to the minimum quantities of water for personal and domestic use.

Boy Tamborell said a constitutional provision would force the government to follow policies that protect the country's natural resources. She said recent policies have contributed to significant environmental degradation, including the drying up of streams, the decline of lakes and wetlands, a reduction in river levels, the disappearance of native vegetation, and the loss of ecosystems.

Even as the Congress was supporting a major change in water policy, some environmental and consumer-rights advocates chastised legislators for their own practices. "Mexican deputies and senators are among the world's top consumers of bottled water," said Alejandro Calvillo, president of the organization El Poder del Consumidor (EPC). "They generate a large amount of trash through discarded polyethylene bottles."

Calvillo said his statistics are based on data from the Chamber of Deputies for 2008, which indicated that expenditures on bottled water that year amounted to more than 2 million pesos (US\$167,000).

This means that roughly 1,972 plastic bottles are discarded daily, and only an estimated 20% of the total is recycled.

"One-third of the money spent on water each year would cover the cost of installing a purifying plant for the Chamber of Deputies building, and the rest could be used to build small purifying plants in schools around the country where children do not have access to water," said the EPC.

### *Water fees, private investment create controversy*

Among the proposals offered by Calderón is a change in the structure of fees charged to consumers for water use to encourage conservation. "We have to radically change the culture and the manner in which we use water, as its careless usage is beginning to cause us severe problems," said Calderón.

The Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD) said water rates in Mexico rank near the bottom among member countries. The average rate in Mexico is US\$0.49 per cubic meter, compared with US\$6.70 in Denmark.

There are already controversies surrounding recent increases in water fees. Mexico City—which has one of the highest rates of water waste in Latin America—increased rates for domestic consumption in March of this year. "The decision caused intense controversy among city residents, many of whom complained about a 500% increase in fees," said BBC Mundo.

Water issues have long been a headache for Mexico City leaders ([SourceMex, Jan. 21, 1998](#)), with water distribution very uneven. Some parts of the city are well-supplied and others lack access to a continuous source of potable water. But the capital's problems run deeper than simple distribution. Successive administrations have been unable to reduce water waste, resulting from a combination of a leaky network of pipelines and careless usage by consumers.

One of the biggest problems is the high cost of bringing water to Mexico relative to the charge to consumers. With Mexico City's altitude at 2,240 meters (7,350 feet), most of the water supply must be brought from lower elevations. "The cost of providing a cubic meter of water is about US\$0.53, while consumers still only pay an average about US\$0.15 per cubic meter," said BBC Mundo.

The federal government's proposal to raise fees nationwide to promote conservation could face some pushback. In a recent interview, CONAGUA director Luege Tamargo acknowledged that these increases could become a political problem in some communities. "The question of water fees unfortunately is subject to a lot of political and electoral manipulation," said the CONAGUA official.

Opponents also argue that imposing or raising fees could affect the poorest people in Mexico, even though the plan makes some provisions for poor communities to receive subsidies. One of the biggest concerns is the unequal treatment that poor rural communities will be receiving in comparison to the advantages afforded to private companies.

Among the critics is Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas, an economist at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), who notes that many poor communities will be forced to pay higher prices for water to promote conservation while many mining companies will be allowed to continue wasteful practices, using thousands of liters of water to extract gold. Some water used in mining and industrial activities has been allowed to leak into the country's waterways, contaminating potential sources of drinking water for poor communities.

The biggest complaint by Aguirre and other critics, however, is what they view as a hidden agenda in Calderón's water plan. They warn that efforts to attract private investment could give multinational companies greater control of Mexico's natural resources. "There will be increased repression against the social movements that oppose the effort to treat water as a piece of merchandise," said .

The Centro Virtual de Agua reports that several multinational companies, primarily based in Europe, have already established a foothold in Mexico. These include Suez Onedo, General des Eaux, Severn Trein of Britain, North West Water Group, Lionnaise del Eaux, and Anglian Water. These companies supply water to residents of Monterrey, Ciudad Juárez, Puebla, Nuevo Laredo, Saltillo, Aguascalientes, Piedras Negras, and Ciudad Acuña. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 30, 2011, reported at 11.92 pesos per US \$1.00]

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