

4-27-2011

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## Recommended Citation

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## Extreme Hot and Dry Conditions Fuel Record Fires in Mexico

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Environment and Sust

Published: Wednesday, April 27, 2011

The fire season has broken records in Mexico because of the extreme hot and dry conditions that have prevailed during the winter and into early spring. As of mid-April, the Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) reported that close to 156,000 hectares of forests and grasslands had been damaged by wildfires, surpassing the previous record of 149,000 ha set in 2008. The damage estimate continued to climb in subsequent days as a huge fire consumed a large tract of land in Coahuila state near the border with Texas. Firefighters spent several days trying to control the fire, which was fanned by the tinder-like conditions and high winds. By April 24, the damage in Coahuila alone had expanded to 193,000 ha. Fire emergencies were also reported in other states, including Tamaulipas and Quintana Roo states.

### *Coahuila blaze "one of most complicated" in history*

The huge fire in Coahuila—which was burning near the cities of Acuña, Arteaga, Muzquiz, and Ocampo—forced President Felipe Calderón and the state government to invoke emergency measures and send almost 900 fire brigadiers, soldiers, and police to combat the blaze.

Environment Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada labeled the fire as "one of the most complicated in Mexican history," although the situation could have been worse had the fire occurred in a dense forest. SEMARNAT officials said 97% of the area burned was desert scrub and the rest involved mature forest land.

Calderón promised a full commitment from the federal government to combat the blaze. "We will be here until the last flame is extinguished," the president said during a tour of the area in mid-April.

Mexico also asked for assistance from the US and Canada, which sent fire-fighting aircraft. The US Air Force dispatched C-130 Hercules airplanes to drop water and nontoxic fire-retardant substances over El Bonito, an area where firefighters were having the most difficulty. Canada and the province of Quebec sent a tanker aircraft to retrieve water from the nearby La Amistad Reservoir to be used in the firefighting effort.

The Mexican Army has also been deeply involved in the efforts to extinguish the fire. "We have set aside certain missions, such as the fight against organized crime," said Gen. Marco Antonio González Barreda, who heads the XI Military District in northern Mexico.

By April 24, authorities pronounced that the fire was 90% contained. "This is not the time to celebrate," said Elvira Quesada "We have to continue battling this fire, as high temperatures and strong winds are still present."

Smaller fires were also burning in neighboring states. In Tamaulipas, firefighters were battling blazes near the Ejido los San Pedros and the municipalities of Miquihuana and Jaumave. The fire in

Ejido los San Pedros, in the municipality of Hidalgo, was especially dangerous because of the dense vegetation. The three fires had destroyed more than 500 ha.

In Nuevo León, authorities said 45 blazes were reported this year. The latest occurred in late April in Cerro del Topo Chico, which forced authorities to evacuate 40 families who lived in the vicinity. Smoke from the fire reached the Monterrey metropolitan area, where 50 residents of a poor neighborhood had to be hospitalized because of smoke inhalation. Medical authorities said the residents had been exposed to the smoke for an extended period.

The fire danger was not confined to the northern states. After touring the damaged area in Coahuila on April 8, Elvira Quesada immediately traveled south to Quintana Roo to monitor efforts to extinguish fires threatening the Sian Kaan natural reserve and the communities of Uaymil and Majahual and the municipality of Benito Juárez.

Alberto Julián Escamilla Nava, the local representative for the Comisión Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR), said the situation in Quintana Roo could become just as critical as Coahuila because of the recent dry conditions. "We have a surface of 2.5 million ha that is of high risk because of the accumulation of highly combustible material," said Escamilla Nava. "We have also been experiencing a period of high temperatures, low humidity, and strong winds."

The hot and dry conditions that fueled the more than 5,700 fires so far this year have affected a large area of Mexico, with authorities pointing out that the last quarter of 2010 and the first quarter of 2011 have been among the driest on record. The drought is part of an extended pattern that has affected Mexico in recent years. In 2009, Mexico reported its worst drought in 40 years ([SourceMex, Aug. 12, 2009](#)).

In addition to the northern states and Quintana Roo, fire damage has been reported in the states of Puebla, México, Oaxaca, Durango, Michoacán, Jalisco, Chihuahua, Hidalgo, and the Federal District.

Authorities in Michoacán are on high alert because the recent hot and dry conditions have combined with other factors to increase the state's vulnerability to forest fires. Catalina Rosas Monge, the state's secretary of urban affairs and environment, said many residents have increased the land devoted to cultivating fruits and vegetables, which has reduced the forest cover. This, in turn, has contributed to a change in temperature and affected the rain patterns.

Rosas Monge said the state is especially monitoring conditions in the coastal areas and eastern regions of Michoacán, home to tropical forests. Some municipalities are also very vulnerable to fire, including Pátzcuaro, Zirahuén, and Cuitzeo, said the Michoacán state official.

### *Climate change blamed for extreme conditions*

Mexican and international officials see a link between the extreme conditions that led to the fires and global warming. "We have seen unprecedented rains, and we have seen unprecedented drought," Calderón said at the press conference in the fire-damaged area of Coahuila. "There are floods in areas that had not experienced them before, and there are extreme dry conditions where they had not occurred previously."

The changing conditions in Mexico were also a key subject of discussion at a forum on climate change held in Mexico in mid-April. Speakers included Magdy Martínez Solimán, the Mexico representative for the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and federal Deputy César Francisco

Burelo, who chairs the special committee on climate change (Comisión Especial Sobre Cambio Climático) in the lower house.

Martínez Solimán said a major consequence of the climate change was an increased outbreak of malaria and dengue fever, diseases thought to have been eradicated in Mexico. Additionally, he said, the changing climate is a direct threat to biodiversity and industries like fisheries and tourism

"Several scenarios rate Mexico as a country that is highly vulnerable to climate change," said Martínez. "That is why it is so important to allow for debate and discussion with the aim of reaching a consensus among all the political players on an issue as important as climate change."

Furthermore, said the UNDP official, climate change has had a negative impact on development both in Mexico and other countries because of its devastating impact on agriculture and fisheries. Martínez said the world is creating a new population of refugees and generating wider and deeper inequalities for women and the poorest citizens of the planet.

Burelo underscored the urgent need for countries to follow up on the commitments made during the last round of consultations through the UN conference on climate change held in Cancún on Nov. 29-Dec. 11, 2010 ([SourceMex, Jan. 27, 2010](#)). All but one of the participating countries signed the conference's final declaration.

Burelo said participating countries have to follow up on agreements reached in areas such as reforestation, reducing greenhouse gasses, technological exchanges, and financing environmental initiatives.

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