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Hurricane Beatriz Helps Ease Dry Conditions in Much of Mexico, but Drought Remains a Long-Term Problem

by Carlos Navarro

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In late June, Hurricane Beatriz slammed into the coasts of Guerrero, Oaxaca, Jalisco, and Baja California Sur, bringing much-needed rain to central and western Mexico and as far north as the southern regions of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León states. But the hurricane proved to be the proverbial sip of water for a country that could be facing its worst drought in decades. The extended dry conditions since last October have already had an adverse impact on crops in the 15 Mexican states most affected by the drought. This has raised concerns about a negative impact on agriculture, including a possible shortage of grains, particularly corn, and a subsequent increase in the price of basic foodstuffs like tortillas.

Drought prevails in northern states

The Servicio Meteorológico Nacional (SMN) and the Comisión Nacional del Agua (CONAGUA) reported that Hurricane Beatriz brought beneficial moisture to more than 60% of the country during the third full week of June. "[The storm] helped restore aquifers, reservoirs, and irrigation supplies," said CONAGUA director José Luis Luege, who acknowledged that the storm created flooding and other problems in some areas. "On balance, it was beneficial."

The SMN and CONAGUA are hoping that the hurricane season can help ease the grip that an extended drought has had on a large portion of Mexico. Drought is especially acute in northwestern Mexico, including Sonora, the Baja California peninsula, and north-central Mexico, including Chihuahua and Coahuila. Meteorologists are projecting 30 potential hurricanes this coming season, 14 in the Pacific and 16 in the Atlantic and the Caribbean. In a radio interview, Luege said Category 1 and Category 2 hurricanes are especially beneficial because they bring minimal wind damage and a large supply of water.

Tropical Storm Arlene brought much-needed precipitation to the states along the Gulf of Mexico during the last week of June but also caused flooding in some areas.

Even though Beatriz helped restore water to some reservoirs in Mexico, there is major concern about low water supplies because the rainy season in Mexico is more than five weeks late and there is no sign that it will arrive any time soon. "We have to be very careful about how we manage the water that is currently in the reservoirs," said SMN coordinator Adrián Vázquez Gálvez

The moisture from Beatriz seems to have been most beneficial to central states, but some moisture-deficient areas in the north, particularly Chihuahua, Coahuila, and the northern areas of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, did not receive much rain. "Beatriz brought very little precipitation to our region," José Abad Calderón Partida, chief CONAGUA meteorologist for northern Mexico, said in an interview with the daily newspaper. "And it doesn't look very likely that we'll get any relief in June."

Calderón Partida said a high-pressure system has increased temperatures and blocked moisture from entering Coahuila and other areas of northern Mexico. Extremely dry conditions have fueled

record forest fires in Mexico, and Coahuila has been one of the states most affected ([SourceMex, April 27, 2011](#)).

In a report released in early June, the Comisión Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR) said fires had burned 560,000 hectares of forests and grasslands thus far this year. "Without doubt, this has been the second-worst year in the number of forest fires," said CONAFOR director Juan Manuel Torres Rojo. "The only time when the situation was worse was in 1998."

Torres Rojo said, however, that one factor distinguishes this year from any prior years. "The majority of the surface affected by fires is concentrated in Coahuila," said the CONAFOR director.

The extreme drought in 1998 was considered in some circles the worst in Mexican history since 1928 ([SourceMex, May 20, 1998](#)) and ([Aug. 5, 1998](#)). Some weather experts suggest this year's extreme drought ranks among the worst in Mexican history, possibly even worse than 1998. "The current situation is critical because rainfall has not been as scarce at any time in the past 70 years," said Felipe Arreguín Cortés, a deputy director at CONAGUA.

Martín Ibarra, director of the long-term forecast unit of the SMN, said the drought started in the northeastern states of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas and spread gradually to other northern and north-central states like Chihuahua, Sonora, Zacatecas, and Durango and then moved south to Veracruz, Puebla, México state, San Luis Potosí, Oaxaca, and Guerrero, eventually reaching the southeastern region and the states of Quintana Roo, Campeche, and Yucatán.

Ibarra said the extreme dry conditions, which have prevailed since last October, follow an extremely wet season earlier in 2010. There are years that the country will be wetter than usual, like last year, and years that will be drier than usual," Ibarra said. "This is a rain deficit."

Agriculture damage a major concern

The drought has already caused significant damage to the agriculture and livestock sectors. Agriculture Secretary Francisco Mayorga Castañeda said that the drought has caused some "serious" problems to the livestock sector in northern states but that the situation has not reached crisis levels. One report said that about 14,000 head of cattle had died or were brought to slaughter prematurely because of the extreme dry conditions. But this number is small compared with 1998, when some 20 million head of cattle were brought to slaughter earlier than normal.

Mayorga said the Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA) has implemented emergency programs to help the livestock industry avert further disasters, including distributing food supplements to producers.

SAGARPA is also monitoring the impact of drought on crop production. Mayorga said initial estimates indicate that the dry conditions had affected more than 1 million ha of corn as of early June.

But others suggest that the federal government might be understating the drought's impact on agriculture. Gerardo Sánchez García, director of the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC), estimates that 6 million ha of crops, of which a large percentage is corn, have been damaged by drought in 15 states, primarily in northern and central Mexico.

Sánchez García warned that the situation could have repercussions for consumers, particularly low-income families, who would have to pay more for basic staples like tortillas.

"We are facing an unprecedented situation, a drought that is affecting 10 million agriculture producers in northern and central states," said Sánchez García. The CNC director warned that Mexico's food security was endangered unless the government took decisive action to provide assistance to the affected growers, most of whom are small-scale producers.

Sánchez García said the CNC is considering several strategies, including asking Congress to allocate 10 billion pesos (US\$851 million) from this year's budget for emergency assistance to agriculture producers.

The CNC is also urging President Felipe Calderón's administration to declare an emergency in 15 states, allowing producers to gain access to special assistance. "We are urging that producers who lost their crops, were unable to plant, or are facing difficulties replanting receive some help," said Sánchez García. "Many lack the resources to remedy their situations."

CONAGUA and SAGARPA are working with some producers to find replacement crops, particularly those that use less water. "For example, we are urging growers to plant sorghum in place of corn," said Luege.

In testimony before a Senate committee, Sánchez García said the drought adds to myriad problems faced by producers around the country, including the infiltration of organized crime into agricultural activities. In some instances, drug traffickers extort producers and prevent them from bringing their crops to market. "Without doubt, the drug traffickers are involved in agriculture, and producers feel intimidated," said Sánchez García.

Juan Carlos Cortés, president of the Consejo Nacional Agropecuario, also testified at the Senate hearing. He said producers in the states of Michoacán, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas are under the greatest threat from drug traffickers. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on June 30, 2011, reported at 11.73 pesos per US\$1.00]

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