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Fire Season Off to Bad Start, but Less Severe than Last Year

by Carlos Navarro

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Mostly dry conditions and above-normal temperatures have created dangerous conditions in much of Mexico again this spring, including the outbreak of several fires that the forest commission (Comisión Nacional Forestal, CONAFOR) describes as high-magnitude fires. As has been the case in other years, many of the fires are started by humans, either subsistence farmers clearing land for planting or careless individuals who have allowed campfires to get out control or who have improperly disposed of lit cigarettes.

Arson is also becoming a major problem at forest preserves. In some cases, fires are set by unscrupulous real-estate developers or criminal organizations, which would go to any lengths to ensure that fire consumes as large an area as possible. In late April, firefighters were met by gunfire as they tried to put out a blaze at La Primavera nature preserve in Jalisco state.

Biggest problems again in central, northern states

The latest CONAFOR reports indicate that the fire season is off to a bad start, although the number of fires and the affected area is short of last year's record levels. As of late April 2011, authorities had reported that fires had destroyed a record 156,000 hectares of forests, grasslands, and mangroves ([SourceMex, April 27, 2011](#)). The damage is down this year, with CONAFOR's Central Nacional de Control de Incendios Forestales (CENCIF) reporting damage on 118,000 ha as of mid-May from 4,200 fires. The largest number of fires was reported in the center of Mexico, particularly in the states of México, Michoacán, Puebla, and Jalisco.

But the northern states, which took the brunt of the damage last year, have also suffered significant losses. The state of Chihuahua ranked among the top six states in the number of fires. And the two largest fires in area damaged were reported near Canatlán in Durango state and Ocampo in Coahuila state. Other central and northern states that reported significant fire damage were Zacatecas, Tlaxcala, Baja California, Sonora, Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, Morelos, and the Federal District.

Authorities do not yet have statistics for this year, but they pointed out that 98% of the cases in 2011 were caused by human activities and only 2% by natural causes, such as lightning. One of the principal causes of fires is human carelessness, either from unattended campfires or lit cigarette butts that have casually been tossed on the ground. Fires are also caused by traditional agricultural practices, where many subsistence farmers continue to clear land by burning vegetation.

Some states are attempting to reduce the number of human-caused fires by increasing penalties. Chiapas state, for example, has decided to apply prison terms of five to 12 years and large fines for anyone proven to have caused a fire.

Gunshots fired at firefighters battling blaze at Jalisco preserve

There is a third category of human-caused fires: arson. This was apparently the case with the blaze that consumed about 1,400 ha of forest at La Primavera nature preserve outside the Guadalajara

suburb of Zapopan. CONAFOR said the fire burned through pastures, dead leaves, bushes, and trees in 10 sections of the forest.

"[The fire] was started in a clandestine dump near a squatters' camp where, every year, the inhabitants start fires, clearly deliberately, to take over park land," said, Álvaro García Chávez, who is in charge of firefighting activities for Jalisco state.

But authorities suggested that squatters were not necessarily behind this year's fire but possibly some commercial interests who want to clear land on the edge of the natural preserve. Gunshots were fired on two separate occasions on more than 300 firefighters, emergency-management office personnel, and residents who had volunteered to fight the blaze.

"There were some threats made in some areas of the fire zone, some people were prevented from entering and others heard gunshots fired to intimidate some members of the firefighting teams," García Chávez said.

Environment Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada said there were similarities between the fire at La Primavera and fires at forest reserves in Michoacán in 2011 and at a park in Quintana Roo, just outside the resort of Cancún, earlier this year. "The similarity is that, once it was controlled, the fires started up again at several points," said Elvira Quesada, who noted that real estate developers in Guadalajara have been trying to build on the edges of the park.

"Somebody has an interest in keeping these fires going, somebody has an interest in doing away with natural areas...to open up land for development," said the environment secretary, who pledged to file environmental restrictions on land titles to prevent any new construction permits or zoning changes for properties within the park.

Elvira Quesada said the Army had joined in efforts to aid and protect firefighters and help coordinate aerial water drops. "We need to increase protection for the reserves...but the Army cannot be in woods every day to guard them," he said.

García Chávez offered another possibility for the perpetrators of the arson. He noted that drug traffickers have set up clandestine labs to produce synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines around the forest in the past, "taking advantage of the reserve's protected status to carry out criminal activities."

The loss of forest in La Primavera could have a negative effect on the air quality in the Guadalajara metropolitan area, since the preserve is considered a "lung" for the region.

"This one was the most prominent fire this year because of the impact of the forest on an urban community like Guadalajara," President Felipe Calderón said at a press conference in mid-May to announce plans for the government to redefine conservation and usage policies for La Primavera, which the Jalisco state government acquired in 1995 through an agreement with the federal government.

Calderón said the Jalisco state and federal governments are planning to form a working group to define ways to finance a plan that would place a major emphasis on preserving the ecosystem within La Primavera. One problem at La Primavera has been the lack of personnel to protect the park from unauthorized activities and to enforce conservation laws.

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