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Severe Drought Cuts Central American Grain Crops & Electricity Generation

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Aug. 28, Estuardo Velasquez, director of Guatemala's Meteorological Institute, said El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua are experiencing drought conditions unsurpassed for the past decade. Precipitation in Guatemala, he added, is 40% below normal. In addition to basic grain crop losses in the four countries, said Velasquez, hydroelectric power generation is well below normal. Electricity rationing (four hours per day) was scheduled to begin in Guatemala the following week. At a press conference on Aug. 27, Joel Toledo, director of the Guatemalan Electricity Company (EEGSA), said the drought had substantially reduced power generation at the Chixoy hydroelectric plant. Chixoy accounts for 65% of the nation's electricity output capacity. In Tegucigalpa (Honduras), the National Meteorological Service reported that a severe drought had begun to affect Honduran agriculture. Agricultural producer organizations say 20% of basic grains crops have been lost. Agriculture Ministry officials had predicted a total grain harvest of over 1,092,000 metric tons for the year, adequate to meet domestic needs and a surplus for export. Corn represents about two-thirds of Honduran grain production. Both the Honduran and Guatemalan weather services attributed the drought in part to the "El Nino phenomenon," or above average temperatures on the equator in the Pacific Ocean which cause current course changes. The phenomenon occurs every four to six years, and lasts between 18 to 24 months. El Nino was blamed for a severe drought affecting Central America in 1982-83. On Aug. 29 in San Salvador, spokespersons for the state-run electricity company (Comision Estatal Hidroelectrica del Rio Lempa-CEL) said the suspension of electricity distribution from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. throughout the country would continue indefinitely. According to the CEL, drought conditions have produced record low water levels in the nation's two largest reservoirs, Guija and Cerron Grande. (Basic data from ACAN-EFE, 08/27/91, 08/28/91; AFP, 08/28/91, 08/29/91)

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