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## **Few Casualties Reported from Mega Hurricane Patricia, but Property Damage Extensive**

by *Carlos Navarro*

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Hurricane Patricia was the most powerful tropical storm to hit the Western Hemisphere in recorded history, packing winds as high as 400 km (250 miles) per hour as it made landfall in Jalisco state on Oct. 23. The satellite images before landfall showed Patricia covering an area larger than Central America. Despite the powerful nature of the storm, rated a Category 5 hurricane, the loss of life was minimal, thanks to the emergency response plans implemented by federal and state authorities and the trajectory of the storm, which landed in a sparsely populated area.

The government initially reported a *saldo blanco*, meaning that no deaths were recorded in the immediate aftermath of the storm. At least 10 deaths were reported in ensuing days, including a couple of campers who were buried under a felled tree and a fatal auto accident that claimed four victims during a spell of rainy weather. Despite the relatively low death toll, property damage was extensive, including the loss of homes and crops in the coastal states of Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit, and Michoacán and in other states inland that suffered heavy rains and flooding, including Aguascalientes and Zacatecas.

The hurricane weakened as it hit the western mountains of Mexico, but the impact of Patricia was felt beyond the coastal states, with flooding and heavy rain felt through a large swath of central and northern Mexico and into southern Texas. In Aguascalientes, for example, the heavy rain caused the San Blas reservoir to fill up quickly and flood the community of Pabellón de Hidalgo.

### ***Good preparation, effective response***

The timely and effective actions of the federal government, in cooperation with state and local authorities, brought some rare praise to the beleaguered administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto, which had been the subject of extensive criticism for the handling of the disappearance of 43 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state in September 2014 ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#), and [Oct. 29, 2014](#)) and the corruption and incompetence of authorities in allowing the brazen escape of notorious drug trafficker Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman in the summer of 2015 ([SourceMex, July 15, 2015](#)). The president and members of his family and his administration have also been hammered by a series of corruption problems ([SourceMex, April 29, 2015](#), and [Aug. 26, 2015](#))

The administration took a series of comprehensive actions to prepare the populations of western states for the hurricane. Several hours before Patricia made landfall, authorities issued warnings on radio and television in Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit, and other states urging residents to evacuate and to take other precautions. To make sure that everyone heard the warnings, authorities dispatched pickups with loudspeakers to neighborhoods in cities and towns. Authorities set up more than 1,200 shelters in dozens of municipalities in five states to evacuate the tens of thousands of people who fled their homes.

"The most powerful hurricane to hit Mexico put to the test several agencies charged with prevention and support for citizens before, during, and after the emergency, including the Servicio Meteorológico Nacional (SMN), the Comisión Nacional del Agua (CONAGUA), the Cruz Roja Mexicana, and the Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE)," columnist Ricardo Alemán wrote in the daily newspaper El Universal. "They all performed their tasks well and on time."

Shortly after the danger from the hurricane had passed, the CFE had restored electricity to 88% of users in the affected region, authorities said. The greatest damage to electrical service occurred in rural areas off the coast of Jalisco, near its border with Colima, and the CFE concentrated human and technical resources in these areas for a speedy recovery of service.

In comments to reporters after the danger has passed, Peña Nieto said the experience of past natural disasters helped the government better prepare for Patricia. A lack of preparation prompted severe criticism of authorities during Hurricane Pauline in 1997 ([SourceMex, Oct. 22, 1997](#)), Tropical Storm Javier in 1998 ([SourceMex, Sept. 23, 1988](#)), Hurricane Isidore in 2002 ([SourceMex, Oct. 9, 2002](#)), and Hurricanes Stan and Wilma in 2005 ([SourceMex, Nov. 2, 2005](#)). "Each of these episodes that we've experienced has allowed us each time to improve our system of civil protection," the president told reporters.

Alemán also lauded the work of the armed forces and the federal police in helping keep people calm and assisting with the evacuations. Still, he credited the residents of the affected states for taking the appropriate actions. "The citizens from the areas where the hurricane was expected to hit paid attention to instructions [from authorities], they went to shelters and evacuated from the areas of danger," said the El Universal columnist.

"At the beginning of the week, society at large was not aware of the dimension of this hurricane. Nevertheless, on Thursday and Friday [Oct 22 and 23], the communications media transmitted a broad message that the citizens needed to take action—that this was a powerful natural phenomenon that threatened the lives of thousands of people," columnist Armando Salinas Torre wrote in *Excélsior*. "In its broadcasts, the media presented real and informational images and offered clean and simple explanations from meteorologists and civil protection experts."

The rest of the country also provided strong support. "The assistance campaigns and collection of supplies and other items were launched almost immediately in the major cities in the country," said Alemán, who noted that the citizen response was "exemplary."

### *Extensive damage to crops*

While the loss of life was minimal, there was no way for authorities to prevent the damage to homes, infrastructure, and agriculture, and the disruption of economic activity. The storm forced authorities to suspend operations at the airports in the cities of Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta in Jalisco, Manzanillo in Colima, and Tepic in Nayarit. Seaports in the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima, and Michoacán also halted all activity, although the SCT reported very little damage to facilities.

The Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) issued natural-disaster declarations in several dozen municipalities in Jalisco, Colima, and Nayarit, many of which suffered flood and wind damage. The storm caused rivers to overflow in the communities of El Centinela and El Chavarrín, both in the municipality of Manzanillo in Colima.

Residents will receive some assistance to help repair or replace homes and businesses. "I want to tell you that no one is going to be left without a roof, without a home, without a job in the agricultural communities," Jalisco Gov. Jorge Aristóteles Sandoval told rural residents. "We stand here with you because it is our obligation to tend to your needs and to move forward."

While the Jalisco governor's promises centered on housing, employment, and other concerns, the biggest worry is the long-term damage to agriculture, particularly fields of papaya and bananas in western Mexico.

On the southern coast of Jalisco, the agricultural sector in the municipality of Cihuatlán experienced devastating losses, particularly to banana fields. Local officials criticized the Peña Nieto administration's declaration of a *saldo blanco* in the aftermath of the hurricane. "People do not have to die for the government to acknowledge a major catastrophe," said Óscar Ornelas, president of the *Productores de Plátano del Valle de Cihuatlán*.

"The impact of Patricia is going to be evident in the next nine months, as more than 5,000 families that depend on the banana industry will be left without their principal means to make a living," said the online site *Chapingo Press*, an agricultural news service provided by the *Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo (UACH)* in México state. "The storm destroyed the entire banana crop in the Valle de Cihuatlán [in Jalisco]."

In the municipalities of Tecomán and Armería in neighboring Colima state, the loss of the papaya crop was reported at 50%, which is of extreme concern because the region accounts for 70% of the state's output of the tropical fruit, said Nazario Rodríguez, president of the *Sistema Producto Papaya de Colima*.

Agriculture producers in southern Jalisco have a deep mistrust of the federal government, particularly in light of the inadequate assistance provided in the aftermath of Hurricane Jova in 2011 ([SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2011](#)). The administration of then President Felipe Calderón promised area residents that it had established a special insurance program to cover most agricultural losses. "A few months later, the residents received 1,000 pesos (US\$60) per hectare," said *Chapingo Press*. "This was a joke, considering that the producers had invested 80,000 pesos (US\$4,800) per ha."

Still, despite the mistrust of the producers, Agriculture Secretary José Calzada Roviroso promised producers in Jalisco, Colima, and Nayarit that financial assistance would be ample, with 150 million pesos (US\$9 million) available for disbursement. About 76 million pesos (US\$4.6 million) or half the amount is expected to go to producers in Jalisco.

"The producers who suffered damage will receive financial support from a fund that draws on an insurance policy and on allocations from the federal government," Calzada Roviroso said during a tour of Jalisco.

"We don't want any handouts," said Gilberto Quiroz Ornelas, president of the *Consejo Estatal de los Productores de Plátano de Jalisco*. "We want the government to expedite the loans."

### *Climate change concerns*

The magnitude of the hurricane raised concerns about the impact of climate change, which could bring frequent huge storms to Mexican shores in coming years. Observers noted that the warming of the ocean waters is likely to promote more megastorms.

"This storm that hit Mexico should serve as a warning to the world leaders who will gather in Paris to take actions on climate change," columnist *Ciro Di Costanzo* wrote in *Excelsior*. "Too often, political considerations prevail over environmental responsibility. We can no longer afford this luxury. Climate change is not a joke. And yet, there are still those who doubt its existence."

Still, there is some debate on whether climate change was the only factor behind the magnitude of the hurricane, since a strong *El Niño* weather phenomenon was already warming the waters of the Pacific Ocean.

Some observers suggest that climate change has tended to exacerbate the effect of *El Niño*, and together they contributed to creating the megahurricane. "Current water temperatures near Hurricane Patricia are some of the hottest on the planet, and well above normal," meteorology expert *Eric Holthaus* wrote in *Slate* magazine. "Recent research has shown that *El Niños* have become more intense in recent decades, and that climate change could double the frequency of strong *El Niños* by the end of the century."

Still, the *Slate* report noted that the interaction of the two factors cannot be proven in a definite manner. "Climate scientists are still very much debating this point—mostly because it's generally difficult to attribute a climate change trend to events that are already fairly rare," said *Holthaus*. "Strong *El Niños*, like the current one, happen only a few times a century."

"What's easier to attribute is the fact that, *El Niño* or not, the temperature of global oceans—and more importantly, the total heat content stored in the top layer of the world's oceans—is skyrocketing," said *Holthaus*. "The carbon dioxide released by fossil fuel burning does a great job of trapping the sun's energy, and recent research has shown most of that energy—more than 90%—is being funneled into the oceans."

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