

Conagua: Water ills are increasing

On anniversary, flood of gloom

BY DAVID AGREN
The News

The president of the National Water Commission, or Conagua, marked his organization's 20th anniversary on Monday by acknowledging that the country's water situation has worsened since Conagua was founded in 1989.

Conagua president **José Luis Luege Tamargo** said that wasteful practices – such as farmers flooding their lands, municipal waterworks failing to fix leaky pipes, as well as residential customers hosing down their walkways and failing to pay their water bills – were driving the country toward a water crisis that could be further aggravated by climate change.

"The subject of [water] availability must be the main worry of all Mexicans," **Luege Tamargo** said. "The population has grown over the past 50 years, but at the same time – in practically the same manner, but inversely – the availability of water has diminished."

The amount of water available per capita has diminished by 400 percent over the past 50 years to 4,400 cubic meters, according to Conagua. (One cubic meter of water is 1,000 liters.)

For decades, water management has been a challenging and contentious subject in Mexico, which ranks in the top third of global surveys measuring "water stress" and per capita consumption.

Geography has complicated matters, as 77 percent of the nation's

population and much of the country's industrial activity are concentrated in the largely dry central and northern parts of the country. The nation's southern and southeastern regions, meanwhile, contain 69 percent of Mexico's renewable water.

President Felipe Calderón has made improving water management a priority for his administration, setting goals that call for providing 95 percent of Mexicans with drinking water by 2012, and boosting wastewater treatment from less than 35 percent to at least 60 percent.

Luege Tamargo said that Conagua reached most of its 2008 goals: 90.8 percent of Mexicans now have drinking water, while wastewater treatment rates reached 40.5 percent. The number of overexploited aquifers dropped slightly, although in the north-central region – which incorporates parts of San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Durango, Coahuila and Nuevo León – 24 of the 68 aquifers are overexploited.

Abating wasteful irrigation practices – agricultural use amounts for 77 percent of Mexico's water withdrawals – remains a problem, however.

Conagua is responsible for administering water transfers and bodies of water, but local governments operate the distribution systems. Water experts say that local waterworks are often packed with political cronies and lack long-term planning, as municipal administrations are replaced every three years.

Water worries

Conagua says some advances have been made, but troubles remain.

90.8 percent

Mexicans who now have drinking water

40.5 percent

Amount of wastewater nationwide that is treated

77 percent

Population that lives in the nation's driest areas

69 percent

Amount of nation's renewable water found in the south or southeast



Fecha 20.01.2009	Sección México	Página 5
---------------------	-------------------	-------------



Conagua president José Luis Luege Tamargo and communications head Heidi Storsberg Montes admitted water troubles Monday.