

# Water shortage, a crisis amid drought

In DF there is an urgent need to change the city's approach to water



COURTESY/RODRIGO NÚÑEZ

Mexican growers report more than \$1 billion in losses from crops planted during spring, in anticipation of seasonal rain. Hard hit have been corn, beans, barley and sorghum.

BY **KEN ELLINGWOOD**  
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MEXICO CITY - In the parched Mexican countryside, the corn is wilting, the wheat stunted. And here in this vast and thirsty capital, officials are rationing water and threatening worse cuts as Mexico endures one of the driest spells in more than half a century.

A months-long drought has affected broad swaths of the country, from the U.S. border to the Yucatan Peninsula, leaving crop fields parched and many reservoirs low. The need for rain is so dire that water officials have been rooting openly for a hurricane or two to provide a good drenching.

"We really are in a difficult situation," said Felipe Arreguin Cortes, deputy technical director for Mexico's National Water Commission.

This is supposed to be Mexico's wet season, when daily rains bathe farmland and top off rivers and reservoirs. But rainfall has been sporadic and unusually light - the result, officials say, of an El Niño effect this summer that has warmed Pacific Ocean waters and influenced distant weather patterns.

Mexico's hurricane season has been mild, with no major hits so far this summer, though a weak Hurricane Jimena dropped plenty of rain on parts of Baja California and the northwestern state of Sonora last week. The sparse rainfall nationwide has made 2009 the driest in 69 years of government record-keeping, Arreguin said.

Though nearly two months remain before the rainy season ends in October, the drought is an unwelcome blow to an economy already laboring under a recession that has crimped ex-

ports and cost hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Mexican growers report more than \$1 billion in losses from crops planted during spring, in anticipation of seasonal rain. Hard hit have been corn, beans, barley and sorghum, plus livestock. Farmers and officials say the impact, including lost earnings, unpaid debts and shortages of staple foods, could be felt well into next year.

"Although no one wants to recognize it, there is a food crisis," said Cruz Lopez Aguilar, president of a national federation representing rural dwellers. He and others say increasing imports to make up for lost crops could raise food costs.

Mexican officials downplay the severity, saying lost production can be offset during the fall growing cycle, when crops are irrigated and rely



less on direct rainfall. A federal government insurance program is meant to cover farmers affected by drought.

The dry period has also lent new urgency to longtime water worries in metropolitan Mexico City, home to 20 million residents.

Officials have for several months been rationing water from a network of outlying reservoirs, known as the Cutzamala system, which provides at least a fifth of Mexico City's water. Cutbacks have recently been doubled, to 30% of supplies. Rationing means lower flows in many neighborhoods for days at a time, but no citywide cutoffs.

In the working-class Pedregal de San Nicolas section, where supplies were already spotty, residents swarm tanker trucks that deliver free water from the government. In recent months, drivers say, trucks have been commandeered by residents demanding that their cisterns be filled first.

"Water is always a struggle in this neighborhood, but now it's worse," said Susana Bautista, a 50-year-old homemaker who says her house had been without water for six weeks. "My grandson tells me that his teacher says

he has to wash every day. 'Well, tell her there's no water,' I say to him."

To boost conservation, Mexico City authorities have announced fines of up to \$1,200 for hosing down cars and sidewalks or watering lawns during daytime hours. Subway signs warn riders that the city could run out of water next spring unless residents switch to low-flow showers and toilets and plug leaks.

Even before the drought, managing water was one of the most vexing issues for Mexico City, which 500 years ago was a big lake. Now paved in asphalt and concrete, the city pipes in much of its water (then, through separate plumbing, expels wastewater to prevent flooding during rainy times).

Since most rainwater pours down storm drains into the sewer network, it is not absorbed into the underground aquifers that are the city's main source of water. Decades of over-pumping is emptying those deposits and causing Mexico City to sink, in some places by more than a foot a year.

Officials have broached the possibility of raising water fees for the city's 2 million customers, many of whom

pay a pittance thanks to heavy subsidies. But that idea will raise hackles at a moment of economic jitters.

And Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, a leftist, has suggested that private companies take over distribution to improve water conservation and bill collecting, as some other Mexican municipalities have done. That proposal is also likely to stir controversy.

No matter how long the current dry period lasts, many people say there is urgent need to change the city's approach to water.

Jorge Legorreta, a professor at the Autonomous Metropolitan University in Mexico City who runs a small water museum, said the long-term problem is not scarcity, but managing abundance better.

One answer, Legorreta said, is to capture and conserve more of the copious rains that fall during normal times in reservoirs and household tanks. He pointed to the inhabitants of pre-Columbian Mexico City, who thrived at the bottom of what was essentially a gigantic wash basin by living more in sync with nature.

"We have to learn from our ancestors," he said.



Felipe Arreguín deputy technical director for Mexico's National Water Commission, says the country is in a difficult situation.