

Issues with boundaries

Mexico is facing several crises when it comes to water. The theme of this year's World Water Day is international boundaries, but domestically, lines appear to be key too.

Mexico City's water woes may get worse, officials say

BY NACHA CATTAN
The News

Water service cutoffs in Mexico City could soon become a weekly occurrence, water officials say.

The cuts, which are occurring once a month, have already forced residents in several Mexico City boroughs to shower with bucket water three days a month. Last week, the rationing lasted six days in some neighborhoods.

And now, instead of the original time frame of several months, some water officials warn the cutoffs could occur for as long as a year.

The capital's reliance on out-of-state sources for tap water has left it at the mercy of reservoirs located 150 kilometers away in Michoacán and the State of Mexico. Reservoirs are dipping to 50 percent capacity, a historic low, and the National Water Commission, or **Conagua**, predicts another mild rainy season in that region.

"We cannot keep sending water that we no longer have," Jorge Efrén Villalón, a senior **Conagua** official, told The News. "The very serious problem will come at the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010."

Decades of mismanagement has forced the capital to draw 30 percent of its water from beyond its own boundaries. Rain ends up in the sewer because the city's drainage system combines runoff with waste water. And with few green areas left to trap rain in the soil, the city cannot increase the

drilling of aquifers, as that is causing the capital to sink.

The practice of channeling water in has devastated indigenous Mazahua farming communities, rights groups say. The Cutzamala system, a network of dams and treatment plants, has allegedly dried up or contaminated their water supply in the State of Mexico. And programs to truck in water have been insufficient, the farmers say.

Solutions to the water problem are also being sought across state lines; the federal government is planning a massive treatment facility for 2012 in Hidalgo. It would recycle water at a rate of 23,000 liters per second, Villalón said. Five other water treatment plants have also been announced.

Mexico City is also exploring an agreement with Hidalgo to exploit the state's aquifers in exchange for water that will be purified at the new treatment plant.

"We could get 20 percent of our water from Hidalgo," said Juan Carlos Guasch, a consultant with the Metropolitan Water and Drainage System.

Not all water experts agree that large-scale projects outside the city are the answer. The capital must become self-sufficient with small reservoirs and treatment plants, according to David Barkin, a water expert at the Autonomous Metropolitan University in Xochimilco.

Illegal settlements must be relocated from ravines and conservation areas where storm runoff can be

captured, says Barkin, adding that a mega plant will only contaminate surrounding communities.

The city has indeed been taking local measures, such as fixing leaky pipes through which up to 40 percent of tap water is lost. About 15 percent of potable water pipes have already had repairs done, Guasch said.

But those repairs have not prevented monthly rations, for now scheduled until June. And they may soon become weekly cutoffs of up to 30 percent of the city's water supply instead of the current 15 percent, **Conagua's** Villalón said.

Water authorities see inter-state cooperation as essential to long-term fix-it plans.

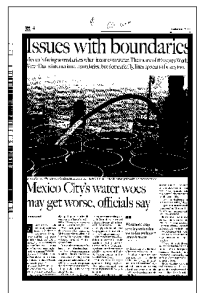
Mexico's water is federally owned and must be distributed where it is needed, officials say in response to criticism from Mazahua farmers. And smaller projects just won't be enough for the growing metropolis of 20 million people, they say.

"If you look at the costs, building small reservoirs would be more expensive than bringing water all the way from the Gulf of México, desalinating it and adding it to the tap system," Guasch said.

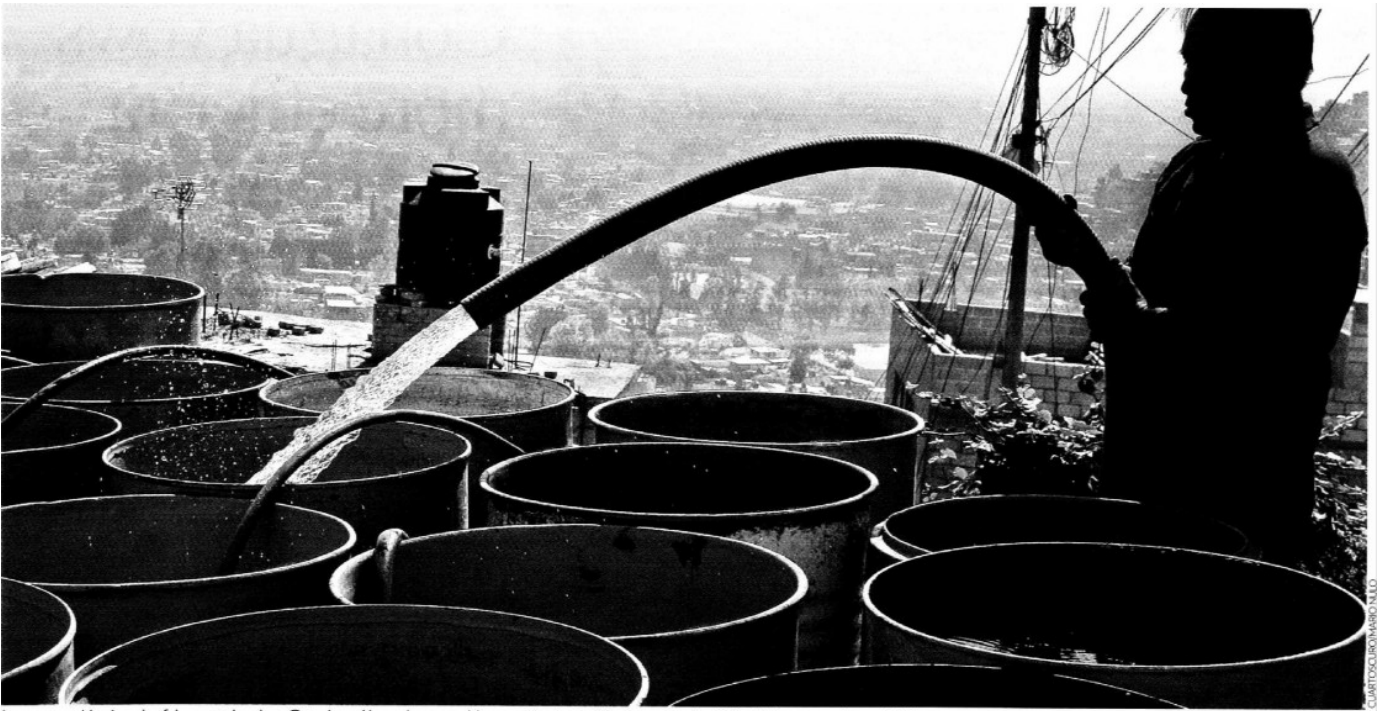
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JORGE EFRÉN VILLALÓN

Conagua official



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In some neighborhoods of the capital such as Cañada and Iztapalapa, potable water like this is difficult to come by. Officials do not predict availability to increase anytime soon.

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