Mexico: Deforestation progresses, but not the measures to prevent it

The Mexican authorities themselves have recognised, through the Secretariat for the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT), the seriousness of the Mexican situation in terms of forest loss.

On 3 December 2001, the director of SEMARNAT, Victor Lichtinger made public the Forest Inventory, containing deforestation figures for the country. Over the past seven years, the annual rate of deforestation rose to 1.1 million hectares. The previous rate of 600 thousand hectares per year was practically doubled. This places Mexico second in the world in the loss of forests, behind Brazil.

Between the years 1993 and 2000, a total of 7.8 million hectares were lost, distributed in the following way: the State of Campeche lost 100% of its forests (200 thousand hectares), Tabasco 58%, Chihuaha, 7% (576 thousand hectares), Yucatán 35% (272 thousand hectares), Querétaro 30% (44 thousand hectares) and Veracruz 22% (270 thousand hectares).

If this trend is maintained, the tropical forests, covering an area of 30.8 million hectares, will disappear in 58 years time, while other types of forests, presently covering 32.9 million hectares, will decrease to 26 million hectares in 25 years time and will come to an end in 127 years time.

The main causes for the disappearance of forests are attributed to the increased area devoted to agriculture and cattle-raising, which rose from 15% of the national territory to nearly 17%. However, officials have said nothing about the causes triggering off this process, among which the North American Free Trade Agreement, foreign investment, large scale monoculture plantations and land tenure patterns, among other, certainly play an important role.

As an example, it may be noted that the need for wrapping paper as a result of the increasing activities of the maquila industry (assembly plants) --producing goods for export from imported inputs-- has given rise to the application of policies to promote large-scale monoculture tree plantations, aimed at providing raw material for cheap paper production (see WRM bulletin 14). In many cases this cause --the exportation to the United States of products elaborated by the maquila industry-- has led to the substitution of forests by large scale monoculture tree plantations, thus becoming a cause of deforestation.

Finally, the mere recording of deforestation figures will not be of much use unless the causes are examined in depth and unless the necessary measures are taken to address them. In 1997, the Mexican government participated in the fourth meeting of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, which adopted a series of Proposals for Action, among which, the countries were urged "To prepare in-depth studies of the underlying causes at the national and international levels of deforestation and forest degradation." Additionally they were also encouraged "To formulate and implement national strategies, through an open and participatory process, for addressing the underlying causes of deforestation, and, if appropriate, to define policy goals for national forest cover as inputs to the implementation of national forest programmes." It is clear that, in the dramatic situation of the Mexican forests and woodlands, it is imperative to start this process as an essential first step in the

search for solutions.