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## Nicaragua: demands to address forest fires

At the end of October and the beginning of November 1998, the Northwestern region of Nicaragua was devastated by hurricane Mitch. The consequences of this natural disaster were enhanced by the extreme vulnerability of the country, by the lack of organization to face this kind of phenomena and by a historically unsustainable use of the land. For example, in the Western Region almost 80% of the rivers have dried up during the last 30 years because of the felling of dry tropical forests (see article below).

Last February, the local NGO Centro Humboldt organized a mobilization of the Nicaraguan civil society in defense of the remaining forests, menaced by fierce fires occurring in the dry season (see WRM Bulletin 20), where in 1998, more than 15,000 fires in forest and agricultural lands occurred. According to the organizers the action was a complete success.

On March 4, the Civil Initiative for the Prevention and Control of Forest and Agricultural Fires met with the national authorities and presented a letter to the President of Nicaragua, Dr. Arnaldo Aleman, expressing their concern for the environmental and social degradation the country is suffering. Several immediate, short-term, medium-term and long-term steps related to the environment in general and specifically to forests are put forward in the document. Among other demands, it requests that the present Forestry Action Plan is adapted to reality and includes the effective participation of civil society, that the draft bill for the Forest law presented by several civil society organizations is finally approved, and that state offices involved in forest management coordinate their actions. The signatories also suggest that environmental crimes are included in the country's legislation and that part of the funds freed from the payment of foreign debt are devoted to the National Programme for the Prevention and Control of Forest and Agricultural Fires. Special attention is asked for protected areas, such as Si a Paz, Bosawas Reserve, Masaya, Mombacho and Cosiguina National Parks, as well as for municipalities prone to be affected by forest fires.

For different reasons, forest fires are on the rise and today constitute one of the major causes of deforestation and forest degradation throughout the world. Addressing this problem is not easy, given that there are many actors and interests involved who benefit from them. In all cases, however, the starting point is public awareness on the problem and organized pressure to address it. We welcome Nicaraguan organizations for having begun walking in that direction.

Sources: Monitoreo Ambiental, Nr. 1, Año 5, enero 1999; Centro Humboldt, 5/3/99.