

Argentine marshland threatened by worst fires in decades

August 7 2020, by Jorgelina Hiba



Parched wetland in the Parana Delta, an area of rich biodiversity that is under threat from thousands of fires

Ravaged by drought, the Parana Delta in Argentina, one of the largest and most biodiverse in the world, has been burning like never before

since the beginning of the year.

During the first seven months of 2020, more than 11,000 fires were detected in the 14,000 square kilometer (5,400 square mile) region, according to the Antonio Scasso Museum of Natural Sciences.

More than 530 square kilometers of marshland—an area equivalent to three times Argentina's sprawling capital Buenos Aires, which lies to the southeast—has been razed, according to estimates based on satellite images.

The flames are devastating the rich biodiversity of a territory that is home to 700 species of plants and animals, according to the National Rosario and Littoral universities.

"The fires generate an immediate impact and others that are felt over the medium and long term: the death of animals, the loss of the natural habitat of many species, impoverishment of the soil, water and air contamination, emissions that generate climate change," Graciela Klekailo, from Rosario University, told AFP.

The delta is a flood plain made up of several islands where the Parana River empties into the Rio de la Plata.



Boats stranded on the banks of the River Parana in Rosario where the level of the river is four to five times lower than usual

Livestock producers accused

The question on everyone's mind, though, is who is responsible?

Environment Minister Juan Cabandie accuses [livestock producers](#) of using fire to clear dry pastureland and regenerate it for their livestock.

Cabandie has filed a criminal complaint against producers and land tenants.

But those producers deny the accusations and claim the fires undermine

their activities, in turn blaming authorities for "lack of control and neglect."

Jorge Postma, from Rosario University, says this year's exceptional conditions have caused the catastrophe.

The Parana River—whose name means little sea in the local Guarani language—is much lower than normal.

"Right now the level of the Parana River in the Rosario port hydrometer is 80 centimeters. Normally in this area at this time of year it's three or four meters," said Postma.



An aerial view of livestock on the parched marshland of the Parana Delta

'Heartbroken'

Javier Torres belongs to a family in the city of Entre Rios that has produced honey for decades.

This year, 270 bee hives in the Delta's island areas were devoured by fire.

"It took years to build and will take me years to rebuild. I'm heartbroken. I haven't received any help from anyone so far," Torres told AFP.

Depending on the direction of the wind, the largest coastal cities on the western bank of the Parana, such as Rosario, San Lorenzo and Villa Constitucion, are engulfed by a dense cloud of smoke that causes breathing problems and allergies.

It's made all the worse by the coronavirus pandemic.

In June, Rosario University researchers found that the city's air had five times the allowed level of pollution.

"This is very serious in the context of a pandemic, with breathing issues," the researchers wrote.



Forest fire fighters preparing to take to the skies to battle the thousands of fires raging across the Parana Delta marshes

'Little Amazon'

While livestock rearing is the main activity in the Delta area, it also attracts poachers, fishermen and real estate speculators.

Pablo Cantador, an environmentalist from the "Don't Touch Parana" group, told AFP that the uncontrollable fires "are the result of decades of forgetting about the marshes."

A group of universities and environmental organizations is clamoring for Congress to urgently pass a bill aimed at protecting the marshland.

They say the new law would create greater regulations regarding the use of the land and protect the Delta.

However, it has already failed twice to win passage in the legislature.

"It's the most important marsh system in Argentina. Here we call it our little Amazon," said Laura Prol, from the Ecologist Workshop, who is demanding action by authorities.

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