

Mexico: Four decades of community lessons from the forests of Durango

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Almost 44 years ago, the General Emiliano Zapata Union of Ejidos and Forest Communities (UNECOFAEZ) was founded in the Mexican state of Durango.

UNECOFAEZ's sustainable forest management has made profitable community development possible, benefiting 10,500 families in Durango, in addition to guaranteeing the conservation of nearly a million hectares of forest.

A tree nursery, high school, credit union, workshops, infrastructure improvements, ecotourism projects and more have all been financed by the union's community management of forests.

As July begins, the rains become an integral part of the landscape of Santiago Papasquiaro, in the northern Mexican state of Durango. For the residents of the region, this indicates that the annual reforestation work is about to start.

This year will be no exception but the work will not proceed as before: the nursery of the Union of Ejidos and Forest Communities General Emiliano Zapata (UNECOFAEZ) didn't grow any trees for the 2020 season, and the 76 members of this organization will have to buy plants that they used to receive at virtually no cost from nurseries.

The UNECOFAEZ nursery, which at its height produced 1.5 million trees per year, did not receive the funds that Mexico's National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) used to grant it on a recurring basis, and was forced to suspend operations.

To Chea Soto, a forestry engineer who works at the Topia Integral Forest Conservation and Development Unit, one of the community companies that developed out of UNECOFAEZ, the situation, although difficult, is not insurmountable. For three decades in the region, measures have been implemented to conserve forestry resources, so he says he's confident that there will be good natural regeneration of the forest, and they will only have to buy a minimal number of plants.



Community forestry companies in the northwest Mexican state of Durango work with an approach that seeks to reconcile timber harvesting with forest conservation. Image courtesy of UCDFI Topia, S.C.

But to José Raquel Ramírez Nevárez, president of UNECOFAEZ, the problem at the nursery is a warning sign: if cuts in federal funds become a recurring practice, that will affect the sustainable management of almost a million hectares of forests owned by the 76 forest communities and ejidos — communities that manage collective land — that make up the union.

The alarm among members of UNECOFAEZ intensified in recent months, when the COVID-19 pandemic caused an 80% drop in sales of timber. Against this difficult backdrop, on Aug. 20, UNECOFAEZ celebrated 44 years since its inception.

In that time, it has established a forestry management model on which 10,500 families now depend — working as they do in manufacturing plywood, managing ecotourism projects, conserving roads or operating trout farms — and which has guaranteed the conservation of 970,000 hectares (2.4 million acres) of Durango's forests.



Forests in Durango, where community forest management has been carried out for four decades. Image courtesy of UCDFI Topia, S.C.

The seed of an organization sprouts

How did UNECOFAEZ manage to create this complex network of profitable projects while ensuring sustainable management of its forests?

At 71, Andrés Carrera remembers precisely its origins and establishment, as his personal history is intertwined with it, having been the central figure of the union for 33 years.

The first intersection is marked by the year of his birth, 1949, when the federal government imposed a logging ban on 2 million hectares (4.9 million acres) of forests in northwest Durango, including areas belonging to the ejido where Carrera spent his childhood, Salto de Camellones.

Growing up in a region that was 87% covered by pine forests subject to a ban left him only two options for future work prospects: to work in the mines in the area or to go “over the wire” — crossing into the United States. At the age of 19, after trying his luck in mining, Andrés undertook the trip north in the company of a friend, Alejo Vizcarra Parra.

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