

6th International Wildland Fire Conference

Regional Statement of the Eurasian Region – An Input Paper to the Conference Statement

13 October 2015

Explanatory Note

The UNISDR Regional Eurasia Wildland Fire Network is one of seven Regional / Subregional Wildland Fire Networks of the Global Wildland Fire Network, which includes the Member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).¹ The Eurasia Wildland Fire Network emerged from the core region of engagement of the UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire. Under the lead of the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC), between 1993 and 2014 the Team and the Regional Network were primarily active in the temperate-boreal region of Central, Southeast and East Europe (including the Russian Federation), the Caucasus and Central Asia. Main inter-regional cooperation has been accomplished between the Regional Networks of Eurasia, Southeast Europe / Caucasus, Central Asia and the Euro-Alpine Subregional Wildland Fire Network – the reason for forming the Euro-Siberian Cluster within the Global Wildland Fire Network.

General Fire Assessment

During recent decades, the UNECE region has experienced unprecedented, large and disastrous wildfires as consequence of socio-economic, land-use and climate changes. Some recent wildfire episodes have revealed an increasing vulnerability of society to the direct and secondary effects of fire. Wildfires are burning at the interface or even within residential, urban and industrial areas. Wildfires are occurring as consequences or collateral damages of armed conflicts, and fires burning in terrain contaminated by radioactivity, industrial deposits and remnants of armed conflicts, are perceived as new, unprecedented threats – although they have been around for some time, albeit largely unnoticed. While there have been advances in fire management in some countries, there are still barriers preventing the sharing of scientific and technical knowledge and good practice between wildfire agencies in different States. These barriers have resulted in some wildfire agencies being unintentionally left in ignorance of the technical information and advancements that they could utilize to develop greater national resilience and preparedness for large wildfire incidents.

Given the cross-boundary consequences of wildfires, e.g. transboundary spreading of wildfire smoke pollutants, border-crossing wildfires and wildfire threats to common global assets such as biodiversity, terrestrial carbon pools, atmosphere and climate, the main goal of the Regional Eurasia Wildland Fire Network is to promote sharing of expertise and resources in fire management. This should be achieved through the development of voluntary principles and efficient procedures on cross-border cooperation fire management and thus enhance economics, inter-operability and effectiveness in fire management between nations and regions. Some countries already possess advanced wildfire knowledge, and have the technologies and expertise to manage wildfire risk effectively. The priority of future international cooperation should be to establish a mechanism that encourages this understanding to be shared between territories, enabling all countries to develop effective wildfire reduction strategies and provide the structure for more effective preparedness and eventually collaborative efforts to meet the challenges of wildfire emergency situations. The necessity of transboundary cooperation in fire management has been revealed by recent events, e.g. extremely large wildfires crossing the borders between Russia, Mongolia and China in April 2015, or fires occurring in terrain contaminated by radioactivity in the border regions of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia in April, June and August 2015.

¹ The Eurasian part of the UNECE region is covered by the following networks: (1) Eurasia; (2) Mediterranean; (3) Euro-Alpine; (4) Southeast Europe / Caucasus; (5) Central Asia, and (6) Northeast Asia. The North American Member States of the UNECE are organized through the Fire Management Working Group, North American Forestry Commission – see: <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/GlobalNetworks/globalNet.html>

Action taken between the 5th and 6th International Wildland Fire Conferences

In following up the recommendations of the 4th and the 5th International Wildland Fire Conferences (IWFC), the GFMC between 2010 and 2012, initiated the preparation of a project entitled "Safeguarding Sustainable Forest Management in the UNECE Region through International Cooperation in Fire Management". An administrative arrangement was signed in March 2013 between the UNECE and the financial sponsor, the Federal Republic of Germany, which entrusted the GFMC with the implementation of the project. The project was an unprecedented effort at the regional level of the UNECE, with participation of other regional organizations or representation outside the UNECE, including several UN agencies and secretariats, to highlight the current and future problems of wildfires affecting forests and other vegetation types or ecosystems, and to elaborate proposals for addressing the increasing threats of wildfires as a consequence of global change by international collaboration.

Its core activity was the organization of the *UNECE/FAO Regional Forum on Cross-boundary Fire Management*.² The preparation of the Forum included:

- Study of the Contemporary and Expected Future Wildland Fire Problems in the UNECE Region³
- Proposal: Building Resilience of Nations and Communities within the UNECE Region to Wildfire Emergencies and Disasters⁴
- Adoption of Voluntary Guidelines for Fire Aviation⁵
- Circulation and Evaluation of a preparatory enquiry / questionnaire on the status of fire management in UNECE Member States⁶
- A White Paper on „*Fire Management Policies and International Cooperation in Fire Management in the UNECE Region*“⁷
- A White Paper “*Vegetation Fires and Global Change. Challenges for Concerted International Action. A White Paper directed to the United Nations and International Organizations*”⁸

In preparation of the Forum, a precursor event was organized – the international congress “*Forest Fire and Climate Change: Challenges for Fire Management in Natural and Cultural Landscapes of Eurasia*”. Among other, the congress resolution included recommendations, which were relevant for the rationale and outcomes of the Regional Forum.⁹

The *Regional Forum on Cross-boundary Fire Management* was held on 28-29 November 2013 at the United Nations in Geneva. The Forum was attended by 49 representatives from 22 UNECE Member States, from other regions, non-government organizations, regional and international organizations (ASEAN Secretariat, SADC Secretariat, Council of Europe, OSCE), and the following United Nations organisations and secretariats: UNECE / FAO Forestry and Timber Section; FAO; UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction / UNISDR; OCHA Environmental Emergencies Section, Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit, Emergency Services Branch; Secretariat of the UNECE Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution. Among other the recommendations of the Forum addressed:¹⁰

- Need to promote the understanding of and the response to the transboundary effects of fire;
- Need to expand the scope of and strengthen international cooperation in fire management;
- Application of a holistic approach to wildland fire management at a landscape level;
- Adoption and continued development of the International Wildfire Support Mechanism (IWSM) and the voluntary International Fire Aviation Guidelines;¹¹
- Need to explore options for the transition from voluntary rules to a more formalized regulatory framework, including the “exploration of options for establishing a UN Secretariat mandated

² Draft Forum Outline and Agenda: <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/intro/UNECE-Fire-Forum-2013-Draft-Outline.pdf>

³ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/iwpm/UNECE-FAO-Crossboundary-Fire-Forum-Report-1.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/iwpm/UNECE-FAO-Crossboundary-Fire-Forum-Report-2.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/iwpm/ifawg.htm>

⁶ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/iwpm/UNECE-FAO-Crossboundary-Fire-Forum-Report-5.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/iwpm/UNECE-FAO-Crossboundary-Fire-Forum-Report-6.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/latestnews/Vegetation-Fires-Global-Change-UN-White-Paper-GFMC-2013.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/GlobalNetworks/BalticRegion/NovosibirskCongress.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/iwpm/background.htm>

¹¹ Note: After the Forum the IWSM was re-oriented and designated as International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism (IWPM): <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/iwpm/index.htm>

with the implementation of a global fire management programme that should have a key role in facilitating the free and open global transfer of knowledge”.

- Suggestion to seek the interest of UN Organizations to become involved.

Following the final meeting with members of the ToS on Forest Fire in June 2014 at the GFMC, in conjunction with the Joint Meetings of the Global Wildland Fire Network and the UNISDR Wildland Fire Advisory Group, the “*International Fire Aviation Guidelines*” and the proposed concept of the “*International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism*” (IWPM) were finalized and published on the website of the IWPM.¹² Additional documents were prepared during the Forum project (quoted above), and are available on the IWPM website.

Engagement of the Council of Europe (CoE)

The Council of Europe through its European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (European Open Partial Agreement – EUR-OPA) continued to support the Regional Network by sponsoring key facilities and outreach work.¹³ After providing financial support for the establishment of the Regional South East Asia / Caucasus Fire Monitoring Center in 2010¹⁴ and preceding activities to address the problem of fire management in territories contaminated by radioactivity, unexploded ordnance and land mines¹⁵, the CoE financed the establishment of the Regional Eastern European Fire Monitoring Center in Kiev, Ukraine, in 2013.¹⁶ Major investments in thematic outreach work included the development of the Guidelines “*Defence of Villages, Farms and Other Rural Assets against Wildfires: Guidelines for Rural Populations, Local Communities and Municipality Leaders in the Balkan Region*”¹⁷ and the analysis of the state of fire management and wildfire threats in protected / conservation areas registered under the UNESCO World Heritage Properties.¹⁸

Past and Future Activities of Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

In following up the Concluding Meeting of the 22nd OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum “*Responding to Environmental Challenges with a View to Promoting Cooperation and Security in the OSCE Area*”, at which the GMFC presented the experiences and visions for enhancing fire management in the EECCA region and addressing the opportunities to follow-up the work of the UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire¹⁹, the 2014 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision 6/2014 “*Enhancing Disaster Risk Reduction*” tasked the OSCE executive structures and the OSCE Office of Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) of DRR, with emphasis on exchange of knowledge and experience in fire management (Item 6 of the decision). This high-level decision of 57 OSCE Participating States reveals the commitment of the organization to continue focusing the outreach work in wildfire disaster risk reduction in the follow-up of the work of the former UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire.²⁰

Messages to UNFCCC COP 20 (Lima, Peru, December 2014) and to the Third World Conference on Disaster Reduction (Sendai, Japan, 13-18 March 2015)

Initiated by the UNECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section, the GFMC submitted a contribution to the UNFCCC COP 20 (Lima, December 2014), which followed the conclusions of the meeting of the 72nd Session of the UNECE Committee on Forest and the Forest Industry (Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Federation, 18-22 November 2014). In the message to COP 20 entitled “*Vegetation fires*

¹² Additionally other documents that have been prepared during the Forum project (and quoted above) are available on the IWPM website: <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/iwpm/index.htm>

¹³ <http://www.coe.int/en/web/europarisks/gfmc>

¹⁴ <http://www.rfmc.mk/>

¹⁵ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/GlobalNetworks/SEEurope/Chernobyl-Resolution-Wildfires-Human-Security.pdf>

¹⁶ <http://nubip.edu.ua/en/reefmc>

¹⁷ http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/Manag/CBFiM_11.htm

¹⁸ Pre-publication information: http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/Manag/CBFiM_12.htm, see also

UNESCO presentation at IWFC-6

¹⁹ The cooperative work between the UNECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire and the GFMC respectively with the OSCE dates back to 2006 and is documented on a dedicated website of the GFMC:

http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/GlobalNetworks/SEEurope/SEEurope_8.html

²⁰ Publication of the Ministerial Council decision at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/130406?download=true> and mirrored at GFMC: <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/intro/OSCE-Ministerial-Council-2014-Decision-6-Enhancing-DRR.pdf>

increasingly dangerous in an insecure climate” the GFMC stressed the increasing threats posed by destructive wildfires at a global level. Governments within and outside the UNECE region have been alerted and warned by both the scientific community and the professional fire management community that the threat from wildfires will become increasingly dangerous in the coming years due to climate change and socio-economic changes. Wildfires may become the most important driver of global degradation and destruction of vegetation. To counter this risk, voluntary rules and cooperation mechanisms have been created, such as the “International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism” (IWPM) and the “International Fire Aviation Guidelines”. However, given the seriousness and cross-country nature of wildfires, voluntary agreements should transit to more formal rules under the UN conventions and, perhaps, towards legally binding instrument on forests.²¹

The GFMC as Secretariat of the Global Wildland Fire Network and the Wildland Fire Advisory Group of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), are serving as a Thematic Platform under the UNISDR²², and has prepared several contributions for the UNISDR Science and Technical Advisory Group (STAG) and the 2015 Third World Conference on Disaster Reduction (WCDRR).²³ Among other a so-called “Voluntary Commitment” was submitted by offering:

“The International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism (IWPM) complements and builds upon international agreements in disaster management and, in particular, it coordinates activities that align with the priority areas identified within the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters, and aims to contribute to the post-2015 HFA”.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 was adopted at the Sendai World Conference on 18 March 2015.²⁴

Conclusions and Recommendations

By referring, among other, to the outcomes of the Geneva Forum and the predecessor congress in Novosibirsk, the Regional Eurasia Wildland Fire Network concludes and recommends:

- Governments of the region and globally are alerted and warned by the scientific and the professional fire management community that the threat from wildfires in the region will become increasingly dangerous in the coming years as a consequence of climate change and socio-economic and demographic changes;
- Governments of the region and globally are urged to take all necessary measures to develop integrated fire management concepts and put in place capabilities to manage fire at landscape level by considering the potential contributions of vegetation fires to climate change, or the potential for mitigation climate change consequences; a reduction of unnecessary application of fire in land use and land-use change, and the state-of-the-art application of prescribed fire where appropriate should be considered;
- Consequently, in complying with the Gothenburg Protocol to the UNECE Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution (LRTAP), the extent of unnecessary burning of agricultural, pasture and steppe ecosystems must be halted; appropriate measures would include:
 - Review and further development of the legislation, law enforcement and management responsibilities of authorities concerning the use of fire on agricultural and pasture lands, as well as on abandoned agricultural lands;
 - Review and promotion of alternatives to agricultural burning by rural extension services;
 - Introduction of subsidies for supporting the agricultural sector to apply alternative technologies, following the examples of subsidies in the European Union.
- Rural communities must be supported in the self-defense of rural assets (farms, villages, recreational sites, infrastructures) against wildfires by the:
 - Establishment of structures for homeland defense against wildfires;
 - Provision of appropriate training, equipment and insurance of volunteers active in rural wildfire defense
- Fire management plans for protected areas, which consider the vulnerability of some ecosystems,

²¹ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/intro/UNFCCC-COP-20-Outreach-Message-Day-3-Vegetation-Fires.pdf> (extract)

²² <http://www.unisdr.org/partners/thematic-platforms>

²³ <http://www.wcdrr.org/>

²⁴ http://www.preventionweb.net/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrrn.pdf

- and the fire tolerance or fire dependence of other ecosystems, must be developed;
- Special attention must be given to develop capacities to manage wildfires occurring on vegetated lands that are contaminated by radioactivity, chemical and other industrial deposits or threatened by military assets including unexploded ordnance stemming from armed conflicts or military training;
 - Urban and rural areas must be prepared to protect populations against the adverse effects of wildfire smoke pollution; and publish transparent and open data about people affected by smoke pollution (hospital admissions, premature deaths);
 - A dialogue must be established at regional level between relevant agencies that encourages participatory approaches by inviting representatives of civil society to define fire management solutions at landscape levels (including forests, agricultural lands, abandoned agricultural lands, conservation / protected areas, and other lands);
 - Consequently, national fire management policies or doctrines must be developed that take these recommendations into consideration, notably the needs for integrating the function of natural and management-set prescribed fires in stabilization and regeneration of fire-dependent and -tolerant forests and taking into consideration the needs for reducing unnecessary emissions and stabilizing or increasing terrestrial carbon;
 - Fire Management Resource Centers must be established at a regional level which will train professionals and volunteers in fire management, disseminate information to the public on early warning and real-time information for ongoing wildfires, and facilitate mutual support between neighbouring regions in wildfire emergency situations;
 - Countries are encouraged to test and use the International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism (IWPM) and the voluntary International Fire Aviation Guidelines.