

6th International Wildland Fire Conference

Regional Statement of the Southeast Asia Region – An Input Paper to the Conference Statement

13 October 2015

General Fire Assessment

Most of the vegetation fires occurring in the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are due to human interventions, notably by local communities and industrial corporations. Similar to traditional shifting cultivation, which is not very common anymore, fire is still used for removing native vegetation, accumulated plant biomass, to prepare land for planting agricultural crops, or to establish plantations. Apart of fires set for land clearing, recurrent fires are common in seasonally dry forests, notably in dry dipterocarp forests in mainland Southeast Asia and on degraded lands occupied by grass cover (notably *Imperata cylindrica*). Observations by satellite remote sensing reveal the extent and patterns of fire used for land clearing, and that these practices continue to be a major regional phenomenon.

This issue remains controversial in the ASEAN member countries, as in 2014, all countries ratified the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, which was previously signed in 2002 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The overall goal of the agreement is to reduce fire use and thus the negative consequences of fire and fire-generated smoke pollution on the environment and on society. Ministerial meetings at the regional level, under the coordination of the ASEAN secretariat, are regularly conducted with the aim to find solutions to reduce and combat fires and transboundary haze pollution, e.g. by working with local communities with the main objective to minimize fire use and uncontrolled spread of wildfires in the region. Unfortunately, the reality in the field shows that there are no significance changes in the fire activities in the ASEAN member countries. Thus, the efforts to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and the negative effects of fire smoke pollution on human health and security are in vain. The regional level solution is calling for intensive cooperation and joint action not only by government authorities but also by scientists and civil society, notably at the level of local communities.

Experience has shown that the problem of excessive use of fire cannot be solved only by a policy that has been developed by bureaucrats who are unfamiliar with the realities and the needs and constraints of the natural and socio-economic environment in which fire is used. Policies can be of limited use if there are no clear and realistic guidelines, concrete involvement of local communities and also strict law enforcement.

There is also the trend to focus on fire management solutions that are not really addressing the root problems. Investments in using aircraft for firefighting or production of artificial rain have often a limited efficiency and are costly. Financial resources should better be used to educate and train local communities in alternatives to fire use, wildfire prevention and self-defense of local assets by villagers, volunteers and local fire units.

Conclusions

It is recognized that since the 5th International Wildland Fire Conference (2011), the application of fire in land use and land-use change, the occurrence of wildfires and the negative impacts of fires on the environment and society of Southeast Asia have not changed and the overall situation has not improved.

Successful solutions for these problems at the regional level not only depend on the bilateral or regional collaboration like with ASEAN, but most importantly depend on the governance and capacity how each country manages its own problems. Advanced technology is often considered the best solution to solve the problem. However, unfortunately it can work only if the entire chain of prerequisite conditions is available, efficiently coordinated and functioning.

By end of 2014, the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution has been ratified by all Member States and appropriate actions are due. International attention is increasing on curbing deforestation, biodiversity loss and GhG emissions by reducing unnecessary application of fire. Thus, it is assumed that in the near future more attention will be given to fire management solutions based

on best science and having realistic outreach to society. The Regional Southeast Asia Wildland Fire Network offers a platform for an informed dialogue among ASEAN member countries concerning the development of fire management policies and pragmatic approaches in capacity building at all levels. Since the 5th International Wildland Fire Conference in 2011, the Regional Network has contributed to a number of national, regional and international initiatives in cross-boundary cooperation in fire research and fire management. However, the network requires continued support by national agencies, NGOs and international organizations.

Recommendations

Considering the unchanged situation of fire in land use and land-use change, the following recommendations, which were made at the 5th International Wildland Fire Conference (2011) remain unchanged:

1. To strengthen forest fire research, especially on peat ecosystems and peat fires;
2. To continue and intensify inter-regional cooperation in wildfire disaster reduction through ASEAN, GOFC/GOLD Regional Networks, UN-ISDR Wildland Fire Advisory Group / Global Wildland Fire Network and Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) and other international agencies. The activities of the Pan-Asia Wildland Fire Network Cluster, notably the training activities under the AFoCo programme, should be financially supported;
3. To continue integrating fire management in climate-change projects such as REDD++;
4. To develop mitigation and adaptation strategies to be prepared for the anticipated change of fire regimes in the region in a future climate scenario;
5. To encourage and support communities in organizing forest fire management at the community level. Experiences of successful community-based fire management should be shared throughout the region;
6. To develop rehabilitation techniques in degraded burned peat swamp forest and forest lands within the region.