

6th International Wildland Fire Conference

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

13 October 2015

1. Introduction

Wildfires are not only just one of the main causes of biodiversity loss, but they are also a big issue in terms of social and economic consequences. They affect population, and they require important investments both of effort (people) and money; they impact the environment globally, contributing to CO₂ emissions and climate change.

In the Mediterranean region, wildfire destroys the protective and productive roles of forests and forested areas, generating soil erosion and desertification problems and reduces water retention, which are both very important functions needed to preserve Mediterranean ecosystems. In the Mediterranean Basin, there are still significant populations linked to rural and forested areas. These people need the forests to develop their economic activities and their lives depend on forest ecosystems.

Armed conflicts recently started or increased in the Mediterranean, mainly in the Near East and North Africa, affecting countries such as Syria and Libya. They are raising new challenges related to wildfire management and control. The use of fire as part of conflict strategies affects valuable Mediterranean forests and forestry lands as well as populations and refugees. Border areas are the most vulnerable and affected. Post-conflict situations where many forest surfaces have been affected also need to be taken into consideration.

In the last years, since the last International Wildfire Conference (South Africa, 2011), many events and initiatives have taken place which have highlighted the relevance of wildfire issues internationally and particularly in the Mediterranean Region. Some of these events have included:¹

- Climate Change & Forest Fires in the Mediterranean Basin: Risk Reduction & Management (24-26 January 2012, Nir Etzion, Israel)
- International Workshop on Multi-Sensor Systems and Networks for Fire Detection and Management (8-9 November 2012, Antalya, Turkey)
- IV International Conference. Strategies on Forest Fire Prevention in Southern European Forests (7-9 January 2013, Bordeaux, France)
- Aerial Firefighting Europe (10-11 April 2013, Aix-en-Provence, France)
- International Conference on forest fire risk modelling and mapping - "Vulnerability to forest fire at wildland-urban interfaces" (30 September-2 October 2013, Aix en Provence, France)
- Regional Fire Management Training for the South Caucasus, Western Balkans and Eastern Europe / Central Asia (15-17 October 2014, Fire Management Training Center, Antalya, Turkey)
- Forest Fires Meeting, Edition 2013 - Agreement for the Mediterranean Forest (17-18 October, Valabre, Aix-en-Provence, France)
- Euromediterranean Conferences on Wildfires (18 - 20 November 2013, Barcelona, Spain).
- UNECE/FAO Regional Forum on Cross-boundary Fire Management (27-29 November 2013, United Nations, Geneva)
- International Forest Fire Conference in the Black Sea Region (6-8 November 2014, Kastamonu, Turkey)
- VII International Conference on Forest Fire Research (17-20 November 2014, Coimbra, Portugal)
- Aerial Fire Fighting Conference (29-30 April 2015, Zadar, Croatia)
- International Workshop on Large Forest Fires and Field Exercise (19-21 May, 2015, Olympia, Greece)
- II International Conference on Fire Behaviour and Risk (26-29 May 2015, Alghero, Sardinia, Italy)

¹ Note: Details about these conference activities are archived on the special web page on wildland fire science and management conferences of the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC): <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/course/meeting.htm>

The objectives of the Regional Session of the 6th IWFC are to discuss main aspects related to wildfire prevention, suppression and awareness and identify transboundary collaborative initiatives to be taken in order to improve Mediterranean region capacity building.

2. Key factors

The main determining factors and global issues related to wildfires in the Mediterranean, their consequences and causes have been highlighted in the documents resulting from the previously mentioned events and are stressed here in order to take them into consideration to encourage a stronger regional management of wildfires:

SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

- Abandonment of rural lands and rural activities, aging of rural population
- Increase of wildland rural and urban interfaces, increase of tourism populations
- Increase of severe wildfires requiring the activation of civil protection mechanisms
- Low economic value and profitability of forests
- Economic crises and reduction of fire management budgets
- Escalating suppression costs vs prevention investments
- Lack of integral social awareness and education programs
- Armed conflicts and refugees

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

- Global and climate change influence on and by wildfires
- Increase of critical weather events of heat waves and droughts
- Increase of fuel load and untreated fuels
- Fire dependent ecosystems
- Need of maintaining ecosystems services (carbon, water, biodiversity...)

SCIENTIFIC FACTORS

- Lack of coordination and communication between research and management
- Lack of dissemination and implementation of results
- Lack of standards for wildland fire-related data collection and knowledge systems

POLITICAL FACTORS

- Poor understanding of the complexity of the vegetation fire problem and the need for an integrated approach
- Lack of long term approach for politics
- Lack of awareness of the value of prevention vs suppression and the need for an integrated long term effort
- Lack of long term evaluation of fire management in order to identify opportunities for improvement
- Poor coordination between decision makers, managers and users/stakeholders
- Lack of coordination of wildfire, environmental, urban and rural policies
- Need to improve transparency on investments data
- Lack of awareness regarding the need for civilian education programs
- Media influence in political decisions

3. International cooperation

Wildfires do not respect political borders; this is the reason why the planning and prevention on wildfires should be addressed from a regional and collaborative perspective. A platform to share and disseminate knowledge, best practices and experiences could be a way to increase international cooperation in the Mediterranean region.

All efforts should be combined in order to take advantage of all possible synergies. Exchange of expertise, experts and resources, mainly during exercises, simulations and training will help improve our capacity as a Region.

Existing initiatives, such as the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS), the European Commission Civil Protection Mechanism (EUCPM) and the International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism (IWPM) should work together in order to develop standard protocols, procedures and training as references for the countries. The Incident Command System (ICS) should be adapted and adopted by all countries as the recommended organizational tool.

A large-scale arrangement for resource sharing is needed within the region. The European Commission Civil Protection Mechanism (EUCPM) is an important step in this direction, along with the International Wildfire Preparedness Mechanism (IWPM) and the currently emerging voluntary Fire Aviation Guidelines, depending on the Wildfire Advisory Group of the Global Wildland Fire Network (UNISDR). In all cases emphasis should be put on increasing the effectiveness of the help provided.

A special effort should be made regarding those countries affected, both directly and indirectly, by armed conflicts. These situations should be addressed with specific approaches developed by the international community with diplomatic efforts.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

FIRE PREVENTION AND SUPPRESSION

1. Prevention of wildfires caused by socio-economic changes in the land use, traditional practices of burning for agricultural and farming purposes and wildland-urban/rural interface fires need to be addressed as a priority.
2. Investments on prevention, training and awareness cannot be reduced in favor of suppression budget. Prevention is the key and is a multifaceted and long term effort and politicians need to address its importance.
3. Local populations are primary players in prevention efforts. Civilian participation in the design and implementation of vegetation fire prevention policies is a key factor. Countries are encouraged to adapt the “Guidelines for the Defense of Rural Populations, Settlements and other Assets against Wildfires and Smoke Pollution” developed for the pilot region Greece / Western Balkans.
4. Wildfire prevention strategies should be integrated in national and regional sustainable environmental policies. Forest policies should pursue optimizing social welfare including payment for ecosystems services.
5. Coordination between urban, rural and environmental policies is a must. A landscape and land-use approach should be integrated in these policies.
6. Prevention measures comprise a wide range of management activities such as fuel treatment, silvicultural measures and prescribed burning planning. All possible measures should be considered and adapted to local needs.
7. Wildfire prevention in WUI /RUI areas can only be effective if efforts are supported by compatible legislation and planning (for example urban, environmental and civil protection regulations).
8. Appropriate knowledge and implementation of fire risk and strategic planning of fuel treatment are key factors to decreasing the impacts of wildfires.
9. Consideration of constraints related to armed conflicts will serve to adapt prevention strategies in countries affected.
10. Effective initial attack is the best way to suppress wildfires and avoid its spread under uncontrolled conditions.
11. Suppression strategies should consider several scenarios and factors: balancing economic efficiency of suppression tactics, ecosystem values, other land management objectives and firefighter safety. The principles of total fire extinguishment should be questioned in specific cases. A special effort to educate politicians and the public regarding these wildfire strategies should be made.
12. Countries are encouraged to adopt the emerging Fire Aviation Guidelines as well as the Incident Command System (ICS) for wildfire suppression.

RESEARCH AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS

13. Research community needs a better link to operational and the decision making community.
14. Synergies on wildfire research have to be considered before starting new researches. A database in which all projects related to wildfire R+D+i can be consulted would be a really useful tool to avoid investing more money in same type of studies.
15. The European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) represents a reliable source from which to develop guidelines and reference material regarding forest fire risk and management in the Mediterranean Region.
16. Continue the work on harmonization of data and information, as well as the extension of EFFIS to all countries in the Region.
17. Enhance Information on prevention and suppression investments to be incorporated in EFFIS; data are needed for the assessment of their efficiency.
18. Operational warning systems for wildfires should be further developed at regional level and linked to the EFFIS Forest Fire Warning System and the Global Wildland Fire Early Warning System.

FIRE MANAGEMENT

19. Wildfire management needs to be addressed and clearly considered as a long-term policy by decision makers
20. Promote the payment for forest goods and environmental services, making forests profitable.
21. Education and awareness on wildfire management has to be integrated in educational programs.
22. Wildland-urban/rural interface fires require specific measures and specific legislation at the local level. Monitoring and control systems should be implemented to guarantee the effectiveness of these actions.
23. Countries are encouraged to adopt the Voluntary Guidelines for Fire Management (FAO)
24. Specific management strategies should be studied and developed for those countries suffering from armed conflicts, in order to reduce the negative effects on the environment and population.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

25. Exchange of knowledge and experiences is the most effective way to increase capacity building and replicate the best practices in wildfire management. Promoting international exchanges between fire professionals of all levels is also needed.
26. Developing voluntary guidelines on prevention, considering common issues such as risk assessment or risk cartography, with an adequate spatial and temporal resolution, will increase coordination within the Region.
27. Mutual assistance on suppression operations requires protocols and operational procedures based on technical criteria, standardization and harmonization of terminology and training. Enhancement of joint activities supports cross-border cooperation between countries.
28. Networks working at international level should combine and coordinate efforts to prevent and fight wildfires using synergies between them. Joint activities should be supported by bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements.
29. Countries are encouraged to adopt the Voluntary Guidelines for Fire Management (FAO), the emerging Fire Aviation Guidelines as well as the Incident Command System (ICS) to assure a safe and efficient exchange of resources.
30. Focal points of Member Countries of the Fire Management Working Group of Silva Mediterranea and the Regional Near East Wildland Fire Network should be more actively involved in regional conferences, regional cooperative fire management training and exercises.
31. Special efforts have to be made regarding situations related to armed conflicts by finding ways to support these countries in managing wildfires under such extraordinary circumstances.