

6th International Wildland Fire Conference:

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

13 October 2015

General Fire Assessment

In 2005 the Caribbean countries established the Regional Caribbean Wildland Fire Network. The objectives of the network foundation were very ambitious and intended, among other, to

- Include 12 countries of the region to actively participate
- Follow-up the Pan-American Wildland Fire Conference held in Costa Rica in 2004¹ and particularly the San José Declaration on Pan-American Cooperation in Wildland Fire Management (*Declaración de San José sobre la Cooperación Panamericana en el Manejo de Incendios Forestales*)²

Furthermore, a regional „Caribbean Strategy for Cooperation in fire management 2005-2011 (and ultimately up to 2015) was endorsed by fire specialists and authorities of Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Trinidad and Tobago.³

At the 5th International Wildland Fire Conference in 2011, the Regional Caribbean Wildland Fire Network concluded that the exchange of information in fire management between Caribbean countries was still insufficient and that there were no financial means for realizing the implementation of the regional strategy.

In the end, only Cuba and the Dominican Republic worked together. Cuba took over the first chairmanship of the network. In 2012, a meeting of the Regional Wildland Fire Networks of South America, Caribbean and Central America was convened in Brasilia with the objective to exchange information, to assess cooperation actions between the Latin American and Caribbean countries, and to strengthen them. The representative of Cuba handed over the chair and coordinator function of the Regional Caribbean Wildland Fire Network to the Dominican Republic.

However, so far there were no coordinated actions. In the last years there has not been formal sharing of information between the Caribbean countries. As a result, the Dominican Republic integrated itself in Regional Mesoamerica Wildland Fire Network. Since 2014, the country has been involved in elaborating the fire management strategy for Mesoamerica and the Dominican Republic.

On the Hispaniola Island (shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic), we have seen how climate change has resulted in the drastic decrease of the forests' humidity content, and a prolonged drought that has favored the development of more frequent and intensive wildfires. Between January and June 2015, the Dominican Republic has registered more wildfires than the average of the last 5 years: 292 wildfires affected 8,792 hectares (ha), i.e. 28.4 ha/fire in average (compared to an average 196 wildfires per year during the period 2010 to 2014, which affected around 32 ha/fire on average).

Despite the apparent improvement in the response capacity to forest fires, there are more fires that threaten populated areas. The people affected by fires belong to the social extremes: On the one side these are very poor population groups that have established shantytowns near forested areas; on the other side, wealthier people who built secondary residences with high economic value near beautiful but highly fire-prone natural landscapes, are also threatened by fire. Many of wildfires are started in the agricultural domain.

¹ <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/GlobalNetworks/Panamerica/Panamerican-Conference.htm>

² <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/GlobalNetworks/Panamerica/Oct%202004%20Conference/PAWFC-10-San-Jose-Declaration-English.pdf>

³ http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/iffn/iffn_35/05-IFFN-35-COFLAC-Caribbean-3.pdf

We have observed that forest fire smoke is ever-more present in populated areas, causing health problems and increasing the expenses of the national health system.

Many wildfires burning in the Dominican Republic originate in Haiti without the possibility to coordinate prevention actions due to the lack of governmental institutions in that country with which we could coordinate joint actions, leaving the Dominican Republic to fight these fires, quite often on foreign territories.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The ambitious goals of establishing a functioning network among the Caribbean region a decade ago could not be realized due to socio-economic and financial constraints and a lack of governance.

Looking at the experience and success of the neighbouring Regional Mesoamerica Wildland Fire Network, in which the Dominican Republic became an associated member, to systematically enhance capacity building at national level and through regional cooperation, it may be advisable that the Regional Caribbean Wildland Fire Network be included in the Regional Mesoamerica Wildland Fire Network. This consideration could be discussed at the joint Regional Session at the 6th International Wildland Fire Conference.