

6th International Wildland Fire Conference

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

13 October 2015

General Fire Assessment

The Mesoamerican region between 2005 and 2014, registered more than 81,500 wildland fires, affecting an area of 2.1 million hectares, with many of the fires being recurrent. Based on the information supplied by the countries, most wildland fires in the Mesoamerican region are caused by humans. The primary causes are intentional burning of agricultural lands, grasslands, debris and trash burning. Arson, fires set for game hunting, burning of forest residues, fires used by beekeepers and campfires are significant, too.

At the national level the following could be observed:

- National Fire Management Strategies are available. The Fire Management Programs in each of the countries have based their actions mainly in forest fire prevention and control within their common – and at the same time – differentiated responsibilities because of the different levels of advancement of each country
- Training processes have continued, oriented to society where its incorporation has been extremely important in Government-driven fire management action
- Internal strategic alliances for Forest Fires Commissions have continued with each country, conformed by different Governmental institutions of the region, that support the processes of the responsible institutions of the fire management actions
- New technologies and tools / equipment have been supplied by the countries for enhancing efficiency of responding to wildfire emergencies
- Countries have legislation in place to regulate fire management, including controlled agricultural burning
- Research has been carried out in the environmental, social and economic fields and their relation with the theme of wildland fires

At the level of international cooperation, fire management strategic alliances between countries have been strengthened for the training and specialization of the personnel responsible for fire management in each country. Countries of the region had access to resources and support from more advanced countries and other international cooperation organisms to carry out fire management actions.

The following activities in fostering regional / international cooperation in fire management have been implemented since the 5th International Wildland Fire Conference:

- Experience exchange in fire management between SINAC-CONIFOR of Costa Rica and Instituto de Conservación Forestal de Honduras (Tegucigalpa, Honduras 2011)
- Joint work in fire management in the area of Trifinio between Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, with support of the German Technical Cooperation (since 2011)
- Integrated Fire Management project in Panama, supported by the ITTO (since 2011)
- Joint work and experience exchange with the Fire Management Working Group of North America (joint meeting in Canada 2011 and 2014)
- Joint work and experience exchange with the Caribbean and South American networks in an IBAMA supported event (Brazil 2012)
- *Foro Latinoamericano de Manejo Integral del Fuego*, organized by USAID/OFDA-LAC (Colombia 2013)
- UNECE/FAO Regional Forum on Cross-boundary Fire Management (UN, 2013)
- *Primer Ejercicio Centroamericano de Movilización de Brigadas Forestales*, with the participation of 19 brigades of four Mesoamerican countries and two from Colombia plus observers from five Latin American and Caribbean countries (Costa Rica, 2013)
- *Taller Planificación para la Prevención de Incendios Forestales*, sponsored by the *Estrategia Mesoamericana de Sustentabilidad Ambiental (EMSA)* (Colombia, 2014)
- Participation in the Global Wildland Fire Network meetings (GFMC, 2012, 2014)

- Training course for personnel from Guatemala and Honduras taught by the U.S Forest Service and Comisión Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR) of Mexico (2014- 2015)
- Trilateral cooperation between Germany, Morocco and Costa Rica for the establishment of a Fire Risk Cartographic System Costa Rica (2014-2015)

Considering the currently valid Mesoamerican Fire Management Strategy 2005-2015, the *Comisión Centroamericana de Ambiente y Desarrollo (CCAD)* in 2014, initiated a review of the Mesoamerica Fire Management Strategy 2005-2015. Between October 2014 and January 2015, four regional workshops were organized in San Salvador (El Salvador) for the establishment of the new Regional Fire Management proposal, planned for a period of 10 years with a review every five years. This strategy includes a Regional Action Plan and is based on eight strategic lines:

- Regional and national management
- Cooperation
- Social management
- Knowledge management
- Risk management
- Operations
- Areas rehabilitation
- Information management

The objective of the new strategy of the CCAD is the regional coordination of fire management along with other mechanisms stated in the *Plan Ambiental de la Región Centroamericana (PARCA)*, *Programa Estratégico Regional para el Manejo de los Ecosistemas Forestales (PERFOR)*, *Estrategias Regional de Cambio Climático (ERCC)*, *Estrategia Regional para la conservación y uso sostenible de la Biodiversidad en Mesoamérica (ERB)*, *Estrategia Regional Agroambiental de Salud (ESRAS)* and the *Estrategia Plan para la Gestión Integrada de Recursos Hídricos en Centroamérica (ECAGIRH)*.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Governments of the Mesoamerica Region in general recognize the increasing wildfire problem in the region and the importance of wildfire prevention, preparedness and control. However, due to the limitations of the public sector, many initiatives do not achieve concrete results or are not sustainable. Governments still focus in wildfire response or suppression rather than prevention and the search of alternatives through integrated fire management. The consequences of climate change and human activities that are leading to the deterioration of the environment, e.g. use of fire in agricultural and grasslands, slash-and-burn agriculture or accidental fires, have contributed to an increasing occurrence of wildfires across the region, affecting natural ecosystems, human populations and national economies.

Recommendations for enhancing national and regional cooperative fire management capacities in Mesoamerica include:

- The enactment of the new Regional Fire Management Strategy 2015-2025 by the *Consejo de Ministros de la Comisión Centroamericana de Ambiente y Desarrollo (CCAD)* is pending. It should come with financial support to implement regional actions described in this Regional Statement.
- The region disposes of trained and equipped human resources, along with the tools for control of wildfires. However, improvement is still required, particularly with regards to the development of protocols and procedures to ensure interoperability between countries in emergency situations of large or transboundary fires.
- Despite the advancements achieved in previous years in the consolidation and development of the fire management programs of the countries of the region, more political commitment and financial resources are required to enhance the overall national and regional cooperative fire management capacities.
- Technology is required to increase and adapt the training in fire management in each country to improve planning, institutional organization and systems for rapid detection, early warning systems and risk indexes for every country and at regional level.
- It is still necessary to strengthen and decentralize the fire management activities at the levels and responsibilities of local communities, municipalities and civil society organizations.
- Fire-management related technical-scientific research must be strengthened.

- Legal and technical solutions addressing agricultural and grassland burning needs to be developed in order to minimize the negative effects of these fires on the sustainability and stability of land-use, to reduce the spread of these fires to vulnerable ecosystems and to reduce the effects of excessive burning emissions on human health.
- The consequences of climate change are already impacting the Mesoamerica region resulting in increasing occurrence and severity of wildfires – with the assumption that in the coming years the problem will continue to increase.
- It is recommended that the countries would cooperate through National Centers and create a Regional Fire Management Resource Center, which would serve as Center of Excellence for fire (and related) data repository, information exchange, monitoring, early warning and facilitation of cross-boundary response to wildfire emergencies.