

6th International Wildland Fire Conference

Regional Statement of Sub Sahara Africa, West Africa Region – An Input Paper to the Conference Statement

13 October 2015

Wildland Fire Problems of West Africa

Fire is a regular feature in the landscape of most West African countries especially in areas dominated by savanna and woodland vegetation. More recently wildfires have become annual events in the forest and forest transition zones of some countries (e.g. Ghana). The causes of fire occurrence are quite similar across most of the countries in the West African region. Fires occurring in these areas are mostly human-caused. Natural caused wildfires are very rare. In most cases fires are set deliberately to clean bushes surrounding villages, to prepare land for cultivation of crops, to enhance regrowth of new grass for cattle and wild herbivores as well as for cultural purposes. Most of these intentional fires get out of control and destroy large areas of vegetation and reduce the long-term capacity of the land to support agriculture. In spite of these negative impacts of wildfires, most countries lack a holistic and efficient system for preventing and controlling wildfires. Consequently the problem of wildfires continues to persist.

Main Advances Achieved since the last International Wildland Fire Conference

In some member countries (e.g. in Ghana, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire) systems to manage wildfires have been put in place mostly through donor-funded projects. Main achievements include the formulation of National Wildfire Policies (e.g. Ghana National Wildfire Policy) and National Strategies on fire management and associated action plans (e.g. Burkina Faso). Community-based fire management strategies have been implemented in some countries (e.g. Burkina Faso), which has resulted in a reduction of wildfire occurrence. However, in the countries where these fire management systems have been implemented, project activities were carried out specifically at project sites and not within the broader fire landscape of the various countries. There is the need to sustain and upscale these interventions across communities in the region.

Gaps/ Shortcomings in Wildfire fire Science and Policies

There is generally inadequate expertise in member countries as well as inadequate government funding to deal with the problem of wildfire. Scientific knowledge on the impact of fires on forest regeneration, fire behavior and fire statistics as well as economic and environmental impact is insufficient. Additionally, there are no systematic efforts to collect weather data to assist in fire danger forecasting. Within most natural resource management institutions capacity for fire monitoring and damage assessment is low.

The majority of countries in the region lack a clear national policy (but see Ghana's National Wildfire Policy of 2006 and Burkina Faso's National Fire Management Strategy and related action plan) direction to enhance the development and implementation of effective fire management systems. In areas where wildfire policies exist, there is no effective legislation to back the policies. There is little or no integrated and coordinated effort towards fire monitoring, prevention, suppression and control among the stakeholders within countries. Across countries in the region there is no effective platform to exchange experiences, information and lessons identified and learnt in fire management among countries.

Conclusions

Wildfire continues to be a problem in the West African region though some gains have been made in reducing its occurrence and devastating effects on savanna and forest vegetation. The gains made by some countries need to be replicated in other member countries in the region. An important area of focus for all countries should be the formulation of National Wildfire Policy for fire management backed by legislation. Because local communities are both the cause of wildfire occurrence and immediate

beneficiaries of good fire management, community-based fire management practices should be the practical strategy applied across member countries.

Options for Solutions

A number of options for action are proposed that will contribute to enhance fire management capacities in West Africa:

- Establishment of a centre for coordinating information sharing and experiences in successful wildfire management in the region and also facilitate regional project development.
- Training and equipping of more local-level fire prevention and fighting volunteer squads and committees.
- Training personnel of government institutions whose operations are related to agriculture and forest and savanna resource management.
- Assess the potential for alternative funding sources for fire management activities not dependent on donors (e.g. facilitate the creation of a national wildfire management fund)
- Improve political support to mainstream wildfire management in government institutions by developing policy briefs on wildfire problems and success stories around the region.
- Community-based fire management should be adopted in all communities in the region.
- Institute a system to regulate and supervise prescribed burning for agriculture and pastoral activities and facilitate the development of improved farming systems.
- Encourage fire data documentation as part of operational activities of state institutions
- Study of cost-benefit analysis as a basis to influence politicians to commit to funding of fire management activities
- Provision of proper firefighting tools and protective clothing for local community groups in charge of fire management at community level.
- Continue research into fire damage and fire behavior.

Recommendations

- To sustain gains made in wildfire prevention and control through donor funded projects, efforts should be made to mobilize resources within countries to facilitate the prevention and control of wildfires (a study to identify such potential should be carried out).
- Success stories of efficient wildfire management and technologies developed in member countries should be shared and transferred to other member countries where these technologies or systems do not exist.
- Community-based forest management should be encouraged or developed in all countries in the region.
- A regional centre or a platform, possibly following the examples of the Regional Fire Management Resource Centers / Regional Fire Monitoring Centers operating under the Global Wildland Fire Network and the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) respectively, should be created to facilitate the sharing of information, expertise, training and human and technical resources for fire management among participating countries.