7th International Wildland Fire Conference

Regional Statement of the sub-Saharan Africa Region – An Input Paper to the Conference Statement

30 October 2019

Introductory Remarks

Africa – the fire continent.

African countries recognize the importance of community involvement in Integrated Fire Management, as fires impact directly upon their livelihoods.

Fire is a requirement for ecosystem health but also poses a risk in terms of damage and danger to people, properties and landscapes. Uncontrolled fires continue to impact negatively across the region. An increase in weather conducive to fire is predicted, under conditions of climate change. An increasing likelihood of runaway fires is expected. At the same time, fire is a useful tool, and the tool most commonly used by communities to manage the landscape upon which they depend for survival.

The vegetation types and the climate variability in this region, coupled with human activities, create a high fire risk. While the South Western Cape of South Africa is a Mediterranean ecosystem, a large percentage of the land area is savanna and woodland vegetation. Ecosystems have a propensity to drought and are particularly susceptible to ignition and intensive burning. A drying trend has been reported over the last four decades for tropical forest areas. For instance, West Africa recorded more than 4% precipitation decrease per decade over the last four decades and this was the fastest rate of change reported for tropical forests. Reduction in rainfall coupled with increasing temperatures over the last two-decades is increasing the fire risk in some countries in the region. Under conditions of climate change, a West-to-East drying trend is predicted for Southern Africa. In spite of these challenges, effective fire management and monitoring systems are limited, and in some countries – non-existent. In addition, some countries are still undergoing a zero fire policy, which holds back fire management establishment.

Most countries in the region have institutions and agencies whose mandates relate to natural resource management and/or fire management. There is a focus upon dryland ecosystem services and rehabilitation, sustainable land-use and rural livelihoods. Many deforested and degraded areas, such as those benefiting from the AFRI 100 project, are currently undergoing restoration at high financial cost; however, these investments should be protected against wildfires by integrating community fire management and planning into project designs. Capacity to adequately address the full scope of Integrated Fire Management requirements, as a subset of landscape management, is very variable and insufficiently addressed at a cross-sectoral level.

Specific landscape fire problems of the region

1. Unwanted fires continue to occur annually in the rural landscape mainly due to agricultural activities, which include burning for grazing and crops; hunting; honey hunting; charcoal production; land clearing, cooking, heating and other daily activities. Although there have been localized improvements and efforts to encourage community ownership, standardized firefighting and fire management resources remain scarce.

2. Wildfire is having an effect on Wildland-Urban Interface zones, with an escalation of large scale population evacuations and damage to many homes in urban areas seen during 2017. During these disaster events, which are increasing in scale, firefighting and local government resources become overwhelmed.

3. While some countries in the region have enabling fire legislation, and institutional systems which clarify roles and responsibilities of the various agencies and stakeholders, others do not. There is a need to revise existing legislation to support Integrated Fire Management in some countries.

2. There are insufficient long-term fire research projects in sub-Saharan Africa. Absence of permanent experimental plots to generate scientific data on the relationship of fire and biodiversity, climate change and its effect on fire regimes, hamper fire management decisions and fire policy direction.

4. While some countries have a specific No Fire Policy, and others use a burning permit system, the judicial systems of most countries are not well equipped to prosecute offenders when it is warranted. Further, the criminalization of fire use, and how this affects communities and livelihoods, needs to be addressed.

5. Leading on from this, while much progress has been made in West Africa, managed fire use and meaningful involvement in fire management by communities is weak, and can create a situation in which rural communities continue to use fire as a management tool, but do not accept responsibility when fires run out of control, in order to avoid penalization.

6. Traditional knowledge and practice is largely not included in formal land use development planning and fire management planning

Gaps / shortcomings in landscape fire science, management and policies

The first step in any program to ameliorate damage by wildfire is prevention. However, the most ambitious and successful prevention programs will not remove unwanted fire from the landscape. There are many accidental and willful ignitions, which will continue to cause extensive wildfires in spite of the best prevention efforts. For this reason, it is necessary to have a comprehensive integrated fire management approach that encompasses awareness, prevention, detection, suppression and recovery.

1. In many countries, there are no comprehensive fire management programmes. There is apparent disinterest, and lack of political will to tackle the issue of wildfires.

2. There is a low knowledge base and research output, combined with a low interest amongst young people. The promotion of landscape management and research as an attractive career option is required, in order to attract the next generation of practitioners and researchers.

3. There is a lack of investment in the development and implementation of fire weather prediction, early fire detection and rapid suppression response.

4. Governments have difficulty in sustaining donor-funded projects. Long-term development strategies are required. Equally, donor requirements for people-centred development agendas should be balanced with fire science needs.

Proposals for solutions / action to be taken

- Regional recognition that fire is a multi-sectoral function, requiring collaborative, coordinated and cross-border solutions
- Concerted effort to put in place cross border cooperation agreements
- Regional assessment of available fire management infrastructure and expertise for the monitoring of wildfires
- Establishment of a landscape fire management forum for exchange of information, dialogues of knowledge and lessons concerning best practices
- Improved private /public sector collaboration at project design and planning stages
- Technology transfer to countries in sub-Saharan Africa: e.g. early fire detection, deployment of effective early warning systems
- Train and support communities to develop community wildfire management plans to guide their actions

- Promote effectiveness of community involvement in wildfire management through the provision of capacity development and incentives
- Integrated wildfire management to include climate smart agriculture. Viable alternatives to the use of fire should be developed.
- Establishment of fire reporting system across the region to aid fire management decision-making
- Establishment/expansion of long-term experimental plots in different ecosystems in order to determine the relationship of fire, biodiversity and soil properties, changes in fire regimes and its relationship with climate change

Conclusions

Wildfire continues to be a threat to the sustainability of natural resources and the livelihoods of local people in the region, despite small gains made in creating institutional systems for integrated fire management. The gains made in these countries should be sustained and shared through both national and international efforts. Efforts should be made to start a comprehensive fire management programme in countries where such programmes do not exist.

Recommendations

- Re-establishing and sustaining sub-Saharan dialogue and networking remains a challenge as countries are widespread, with limited financial resources. However, at least one annual regional meeting should be convened to dialogue knowledge, discuss progress of work on fire management, share lessons and challenges and facilitate transfer of technology.
- Improve relationship and co-operation between the scientific community and governments. Scientists should be supported to establish fire monitoring research plots for long-term research and training of the next generation of fire ecologists and scientists.
- Community volunteer and village groups should be encouraged, supported, and incentivized to assist with fire prevention and management.
- Extension services have to be supported and expanded to improve implementing Integrated Fire Management practice.