



8TH
INTERNATIONAL
WILDLAND FIRE
CONFERENCE

GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES:
Towards an International
Framework
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8th International Wildland Fire Conference

Global Wildland Fire Network – Statement of the Southeast Europe / Caucasus Region – Regional Fire Monitoring Center (RFMC)

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Introductory remarks

Fires pose a major risk to the landscapes of South-Eastern Europe (SEE) and the South Caucasus (SC). Historically, the majority of fires in these regions have been caused by human activities, particularly in the context of agricultural and pastoral land use. Unfortunately, in some of the countries due to socio-economic conditions, arson has become one of the significant causes of fires. With climate change, the frequency and intensity of fires could – along with their threats – increase as temperatures become warmer, precipitation levels change, and heatwaves and droughts become more frequent and intense – conditions that are conducive for the occurrence and spread of fires.

Uncontrolled and undesired wildfires often pose environmental, economic, social and health risks and therefore may affect human security. Additionally, the subsequent impacts of fires, such as erosion, landslides, mudflows and floods, might become an additional burden for rural populations, especially those who are already marginalized, thus negatively impacting socio-economic stability and livelihood security, and thereby pressuring societies further.

Moreover, these impacts and challenges are oftentimes not confined to one country and are instead shared across multiple jurisdictions. As a result, the corresponding solutions require joint co-operative efforts.

Specific landscape fire problems of the region

The presence of unexploded ordnance (UXO), heritage of armed conflicts, as a long-term or permanent problem is recognised in the entire region. This was stressed in the regional statement for the last conference. However, due to its significance and the recent developments, particularly in the region of the South Caucasus, this problem is stressed again. The presence of UXO is an emerging concern in the management of landscape fires on any land with vegetation cover. The combustion of UXO and the dispersal of contaminants pose a threat to the public and the environment over a wide area, and a particularly serious threat to firefighters working in contaminated areas.

In the previous statement, published at IWFC-7 in 2019, the most common and most important gaps / shortcomings in terms of Landscape Fire Management (LFM) in the region of SEE/SC had been highlighted. They still exist: Institutional and sectoral responsibilities in LFM, abandoned agricultural and pasture lands, specialized training and personnel, need of volunteer firefighters and special equipment, participation of civil society, use of advanced data and information systems (forest fire early warning systems) and fire research and its application in forest and fire management.

Except this, in order to understand the broader significance of the landscape fires in the region, it is important to explain their economic, social and environmental context.

Throughout the region, landscape fires have negative social impacts, mainly related to the decrease of living quality, air quality and health, threat of life, security of the affected population.¹ Wildfires increase air pollution in surrounding areas and can affect regional air quality. The influence of the smoke from LFs on human health additionally was complicated due to COVID-19 pandemic.²

¹ <https://www.epa.gov/air-research/wildland-fire-research-health-effects-research>

² <https://gfmc.online/eurofire/covid19.html>



Wildfires may cause distrust of governments and may foster social tensions. There could be social consequences in terms of a community torn apart by litigation processes or by public mistrust towards agencies caused by poorly organized recovery work fueled by media logics reinforcing a blame game. The secondary consequences of a disaster are strongly affected by the ways in which actors perceive the disaster and respond to it.

With regard to the environment, a variety of unique fauna and flora can be found in the region, increasing its natural value. Because of this, more than 30 National Parks are proclaimed in the frame of this regional network. Large forest and landscape fires are not part of natural succession apart from Mediterranean ecotypes that cover small part of the territory. Thus, the majority of landscape fires have a negative environmental impact on biodiversity (both fauna and flora), soil erosion and soil runoff, as well as other secondary impacts such as water pollution, landslides and flash floods.

Economically, the negative impacts can impose a great financial burden on the population and the economy, including (i) resources spent on fire suppression; (ii) the loss of commercial value of damaged wood products; (iii) the costs related to loss of ecosystem services (i.e., biodiversity protection, water cycle regulation, supply of recreational areas, soil protection, carbon sequestration, etc.).

The two main drivers of increased risk of landscape fires can be characterized as follows:

- Climate change: The average temperature of the region has increased over the past 20 years from 9.7°C to 10.9°C and is expected to further increase by 4°C to 5°C until the end of the century (based on business-as-usual scenario RCP 8.5). The already scarce precipitation throughout the region is expected to decrease further. It is expected out of such changed climate scenarios, that the risk and severity of landscape fires that occur in the region will increase in the future, in both frequency and intensity.
- Land-use practices: The change in land use, particularly over the past 30 years, is increasing the risk for landscape fires. This trend is on one hand the consequence of the exodus of rural population to urban centres resulting in the abandonment of agricultural land use and regulated pasture. On the other hand, unregulated housing development and inadequate regulation in respect to land and forest use contributes to both an increasing wildfire risk and an increasing vulnerability.

Combination of these factors increase the risk for landscape fires. Around 98% of landscape fires are a result of human activity, while lightning is responsible for less than 2% of forest fires.

Main advances achieved since the last International Wildland Fire Conference: Action taken between the 7th and 8th Conferences

The period between the 7th and 8th conference was extremely difficult and with many challenges for the entire world including the SEE/SC region due to the CoVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, RFMC and RSEECWFN were active, implemented various activities and achieved certain results, such as:

- Organization of the workshop “Climate change and landscape fire management in the Western Balkans (6-7 February 2020, Skopje, N. Macedonia)
- Participation on the online International Conference on Forest Fires and Environmental Change (title of the presentation: Landscape fire management in the Western Balkans - main drivers and challenges), 4-5 August 2020, Istanbul, Turkey
- Basic fire safety course and training for children and vulnerable groups in Karbinci; Interreg IPA CBC project (Republic of Bulgaria / Republic of N. Macedonia “Establishment of a dialogue of care: our shared responsibility towards the future”) 09-11 and 18-20 February 2022, Karbinci, N. Macedonia
- Participation on Joint workshop “Develop, adopt and transfer innovative solutions and actions to prevent and control wildfires” 24-27 October 2022 Antalya, Turkey. Organizer - General Directorate of Forestry Turkey, Silva Mediterranea and FOREST EUROPE



- Participation on "Workshop on Climate Change and Security in the Shar/Šara Mountains and Korab Massif Area: "Developing a joint co-operation/adaptation strategy and an implementation plan", 2-3 November 2022, Mavrovo, N. Macedonia.
- Climate Change and Security Cross-regional Workshop "Wildfire Management for Enhancing Climate Resilience and Security" 5-6 December 2022, Skopje, North Macedonia. Organizer – OSCE, GFMC and RFMC
- Project "Landscape Fire Management Programme in Western Balkans" (SDC financed project), 2022-2025. Strategic Partners: GFMC, RFMC and HAEFL (Hochschule für Agrar-, Forst- und Lebensmittelwissenschaften). Regional executing agency: Helvetas/Farmahem. Countries participants: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, N. Macedonia and Serbia.

Conclusions and recommendations

Extreme weather events such as long-lasting droughts create the condition for devastating fires. Post-fire rainstorms result in secondary disasters such as erosion, landslides, and siltation of rivers. Moreover, insect outbreaks (i.e. bark beetles) and plant diseases are common occurrences after landscape fires. Climate change, land-use change, and the rural exodus are increasing the ecosystem's vulnerability to landscape fires in the Western Balkans, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and represents one of the most affected regions in Europe by landscape fires.

As a result of the above listed and previous regional activities and facts for the current situation with LF in the Western Balkans the project "Landscape Fires Management Programme in the Western Balkans" (LFMWB) was launched in April 2022.³

To mitigate the negative impacts of landscape fires in the Western Balkans, it is necessary to have inclusive, cross-boundary cooperation and knowledge exchange to strengthen the capacities for LFM in the region. These aspects are incorporated in the LFMWB Programme.

The overall goal of this LFMWB is to increase resilience of Western Balkan forests and landscapes against fires for the benefit of those who depend on these landscapes for their livelihoods and socioeconomic development. The participatory approach of the LFMWB addresses the inclusion of local population in the processes, promotes gender equality, and further strengthens public awareness of the importance of safeguarding natural resources.

The LFMWB Programme will contribute to establish strong operational national and regional networks for LFM through multi-stakeholder policy dialogues, foster better cooperation and strengthen the capacities in the WB region.

Having in mind that landscape fires due to many reasons (climate change, migration of the population, land use changes and vegetation changes etc.) becomes more frequent, intense and very often beyond the capacities of the country to control it, there could be one general recommendation:

The countries of a same region with similar environmental and socio-economic conditions that suffer from landscape fires, with tendency for worsening of the situation, should work on building of a regional approach of LFM. It will ensure sharing of national capacities, information and knowledge but building of more resilient landscapes to landscape fires, as well.

³ <https://gfmc.online/wp-content/uploads/EDA-SDC-Landscape-Fire-Management-Western-Balkans-litaiative-Phase-I-2019-2025.pdf>