



8TH
INTERNATIONAL
WILDLAND FIRE
CONFERENCE

GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES:
Towards an International
Framework
www.wildfire2023.pt

Porto-Portugal
May 16-19th
2023

8th International Wildland Fire Conference

Regional Statement North America – An Input Paper to the Conference Statement

21 February 2023

Introductory Remarks

The UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) North American Regional Wildland Fire Network is one of 14 Regional / Subregional Wildland Fire Networks of the [Global Wildland Fire Network](#). The North American Fire Network is led by the North American Forestry Commission – Fire Management Working Group (FMWG).

Specific landscape fire problems of the North American region

The landscape across this Regional Fire Network spans a broad range of climates and vegetative zones. Weather with the potential to drive extreme fire behavior is increasingly common across the region at specific times. In many places, volatile fuels sit in the intermix with communities and infrastructure. Over the last half decade all areas of the region have seen continued challenges and pressure on fire management resources. The confluence of a changing climate with increased development of landscapes has led to escalated community losses and fatalities in some countries within the region in recent years. Resource sharing between the countries in the region is being increasingly used to address shortfalls in fire suppression resources relative to increases in fire load.

The traditional delineation of the year into a “fire season” and a period with no expectation of significant activity continues to change; the ‘fire season’ is being stretched such that some regions are essentially experiencing a ‘fire year’. That is, increasingly in some regions there is the potential need to mount very significant response effort, to large and problematic wildfire, at any point in the year. This is an important shift that is beginning to affect the fire management business across high population landscapes (e.g., the continental United States). The United States began using the term ‘fire year’ in 2020 and officially transitioned to it during 2021. A similar situation occurs in Mexico, which is seeing these types of fires now occurring at any time of the year.

Issues related to operational health and wellbeing

The Coronavirus significantly changed operational response to wildland fires. Incident management teams adopted new health screening procedures and mask mandates and increased the ability to work remotely. International wildland firefighting support was limited and, in some cases, prohibited. COVID-19 opened the door for more national-level responses and coordination in the face of global emergencies. Some land management agencies were called upon for all-hazard incident response and support – not only for medical response to victims of the virus itself but also to manage vaccination centers. Post-COVID, workforce issues that are affecting all occupations are continuing to affect wildland fire as well, including mental health issues and burn out.

Gaps / shortcomings in landscape fire science, management and policies

Over the period since the 7th IWFC, this region has looked to improve the cross-border deployment of resources in times of need. This is in response to the expectation that high fire loads will increasingly challenge current operational capacities across the region. It is recognized that such deployments of resources must be timely and consistent (i.e., meet agreed to minimum standards) to be effective. Agreements, operating plans, and memorandums of understanding (MOU) have been updated or put in place to facilitate such deployments. To provide more effective assessment of deployment potential,



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further discussion is needed between operational response agencies to identify basic international resource sharing standards and guidelines.

The need for continued incorporation of fire science and information management to enhance fire intelligence for fire decision making has been recognized in many jurisdictions. Similarly, recognition has grown as to the importance of proactive, “whole of society” risk mitigation approaches (such as FireWise in the United States and FireSmart in Canada). Fire management agencies across the region could benefit from regular cross-jurisdictional sharing of approaches and lessons learned on information and decision support system development and utilization.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion issues are important in fire management, however historically this area has received little attention. This includes recognition of the cultural relevance of wildfire to many Indigenous peoples and the importance of their inclusion in fire management. Such issues are increasingly seeing emphasis across the region but there is need for genuine engagement and partnerships on this topic.

Main advances achieved since the last International Wildland Fire Conference

Expanded suppression resource sharing has seen hundreds of personnel deployed between Mexico, Canada, and the United States as needed during periods of extreme wildfires since the IWFC in 2019; hundreds of personnel from Canada and the United States also deployed to Australia during the 2019-2020 bush fires. It may be that cross-border and even global wildfire support is becoming more the norm than the exception. This has allowed the process of international resource deployment to be tested and further streamlined in many cases. Ongoing off-season discussions and after-action reviews continue to identify issues with and enhancements to these activities.

Scientific advances in wildfire science have continued through ongoing investment by some countries in the region in long-term fire science programs (i.e., the US Joint Fire Science Program and the “Blueprint for Wildland Fire Science in Canada (2019-2029)”), followed by increased federal investment supporting wildland fire management. Initial discussion of a broader North American science gap analysis (similar to the Canadian Blueprint) and targeted joint science program have begun.

Beyond emergency response to wildfires, there is recognition that proactive actions need to be made to reduce the adverse effects of wildfire on landscapes and communities. For example, in January 2022, the United States Forest Service released its *Wildfire Crisis Strategy*, focused on proactive management in pre-identified firesheds (e.g., using mechanical treatments or prescribed burns) to reduce the overall fuel loading. In Canada, the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers is pursuing risk reduction through enhanced prevention and mitigation measures and activities, including a national ‘whole of society’ dialogue to identify priorities and needs across broad sectors of society, and development of a pan-Canadian Prevention and Mitigation Strategy (to be released later this year).

Several ‘Women in Wildfire’ forums and training sessions, such as the Women in Fire Training Exchange (WTREX), are resuming and expanding within the region after being on a pause due to COVID. These sessions are designed to recognize gender issues in fire management and provide opportunities for training exclusively targeted to increase the role of women in wildfire management. Further, an International Diversity Mentorship Program is being initiated between FMWG and the Australasian Forest Fire Management Group.

Conclusions

Wildfire management is, as anticipated, becoming increasingly challenging. There are numerous drivers of these changes and there will be numerous ways wildland fire management agencies must continue to adapt. Communication and the sharing of both new challenges and new solutions is more important than ever. Cross-jurisdictional support for operational wildfire management during periods of extreme wildfire activity has increased over the period since the last IWFC and such continued international cooperation is critical for responding to pressures facing wildfire management organizations.



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Future Directions

- Off-season work to enable timely resource exchange between countries should continue. This includes discussions and development of common deployment guidelines and standards for skills and training. Such discussions should increasingly involve other jurisdictions across the Global Wildland Fire Network and should be supported.
- Broader discussions on common North American fire management science needs should continue. This work should identify projects of common interest and benefit across multiple jurisdictions.
- Continue sharing information regarding the ongoing exchanges being seen across the region at established venues like: the NAFC-FMWG annual meeting, the FMWG/FFMG Fire Management Study Tour, the International Wildland Fire Conference, and other opportunities for potential face-to-face communication.
- Consider developing an exchange program among the North American countries with fire managers, fire researchers, and operational personnel.
- Continue to offer options and opportunities to engage communities in the wildland urban interface and work with them to become more resistant to wildfire threats.
- Continue support for diversity, equity, and inclusion within wildfire management agencies.
- Continue to work together to share resources on risk reduction and community resilience efforts by wildfire management agencies, inclusive of cultural and prescribed fire.
- Continue promoting the strengthening and development of fire management capacities in countries within and outside the North American region.

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