



The First Pan-American Conference on Wildland Fire

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Statement
By

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Distinguished participants,
Guests and colleagues,
Good morning.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to join you on the occasion of the first Pan American Conference on Wildland Fire. On behalf of the Director-General of FAO, Mr Jacques Diouf, I welcome you all to this important meeting. I also wish to extend my thanks to the Government of Costa Rica for the excellent arrangements they have made for our meeting.

This is the first major event that is jointly organized by the FAO Latin American and Caribbean Forestry Commission, and the North American Forest Commission. I would be interested in hearing your views as to whether or not we should consider other joint activities along these lines in the future.

There is a growing body of evidence to indicate that unplanned forest fires are increasing in both frequency and severity. There are a number of reasons for this. In many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, there is more pressure than ever to convert forests into other land uses, fuelled principally by poverty and the need to obtain food. In some countries, such as the United States, one of the major causes of catastrophic fires is the accumulation of fuels in unmanaged forests. Ironically, effective fire prevention programmes may have contributed to the problem. Fire strategies need to address the reasons and root causes for fires. The cost of mitigating the underlying causes of fire is usually more cost effective than investments in fire suppression technologies and resources.

Primary responsibility for managing forest fires lies with each country. FAO and other United Nations agencies can provide technical support, but we do not have the capacity or mandate to fight forest fires. But the reason we are here today is to consider how countries can help each other. Many of the problems that each country faces are similar those faced by other countries. By sharing information, technology, and expertise, all countries are better off. FAO and other United Nations organizations can exercise their comparative advantage by helping to facilitate cooperation among countries.

FAO is ready and willing to support this process. We believe that international cooperation is fundamental when it comes to monitoring, preventing, controlling, and managing forest fires. FAO is taking several specific actions to support international cooperation in forest fires:

- For many years, FAO has been providing technical assistance to individual countries to increase their fire management capacities. We have learned that an effective fire

management strategy must be both bottom-up and top-down. When I say bottom-up, I refer to the importance of community-based fire management approaches. The people who are most affected by fires must be part of the solution. When I say top-down, I refer to the importance of effective fire management leadership and policies at the national level. And effective law enforcement is necessary at all levels.

- In the past five years, FAO has hosted two international expert consultations on forest fires.
- In collaboration with a number of partners, FAO is supporting community-based approaches to fire management. For example, a regional training programme will be carried out next week in South Africa.
- In collaboration with the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) and a number of other partners, FAO has supported the formation of regional fire networks, including the meeting in Curitiba in June of this year.
- The Fire Management Working Group was formed by the FAO North American Forest Commission over 40 years ago. This working group has co-sponsored all three of the global Wildland Fire conferences, including the recent Summit in Sydney, Australia.
- Recently, the Director-General of FAO approved funding for a regional project to develop a strategy for fire management in Latin America and the Caribbean. This project is helping to support this Conference, and funds will be available following the Conference to support follow-up activities. If you need more information about this project, please speak with Dr. Carneiro, is the project coordinator.

Last but not least, I have the pleasure to inform you that international cooperation on forest fires will be a major agenda item at two meetings in Rome in March 2005. The Director-General of FAO has invited Ministers responsible for forests to FAO Headquarters in Rome on 14 March 2005 to discuss international cooperation on forest fires, and to consider ways to strengthen the international commitment to sustainable forest management. The declaration that is adopted by the Pan American Fire Conference this afternoon will be presented to the Ministerial Meeting for consideration.

The Ministerial Meeting will be immediately followed by the Committee on Forestry, better known to most of us as COFO. The 17th session of COFO will take place in Rome from 15 - 19 March 2005. We will have a special side event on forest fires on 16 March, and on 17 March COFO will discuss specific ways to implement the recommendations of the Ministerial Meeting.

Today's Conference is a very ambitious undertaking for FAO. This is the first time that we have tried to bring together so many national forestry leaders from so many countries in two major regions of the world to address the matter of forest fires. I look forward to listening to your concerns and to participating in the discussions about what steps might be taken to strengthen international cooperation on forest fires throughout the Pan American region.

Thank you.