

# Pan-American Wildland Fire Conference

San José, Costa Rica, 21 – 24 October 2004

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## Central America and Mexico Regional Brief on International Cooperation in Wildland Fire Management<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

The Central America and Mexico Regional Network on Forest Fires and Pests was officially established during the meeting of the Central American Council of Forests and Protected Areas (CCAB/AP), whose members are the directors of the national forest service of each country in the region, held in El Salvador 18–19 August 2004.

In the case of forest fires, there have been various efforts since 1996 when the Central American Regional Technical Committee for Forest Fires (COTCAMAF) was established during the 19<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Meeting of CCAD on 11 March 1996. On 23–24 June 1998 the Workshop on Forest Fires in Honduras generated increased political interest of governments. As a result, it was agreed that each country in the region should develop action plans for the dry season of 1999 and that the agreements from 11 March 1996 should be reactivated.

Following these efforts, they were again reactivated through the first Mesoamerican Meeting on Cooperation Regarding Protection Against Forest Fires, held in Guatemala 8–9 July, 2002, followed by a workshop to develop a regional strategic plan for forest fires and pests, held in Honduras 26–30 August 2002.

In order to concrete this strategic plan, two further workshops were held, one in Guatemala 26-27 April 2004, and one in El Salvador 8–9 July 2004, both to work on an action plan for Central America and Mexico to prevent and control forest fires and pests; with financial assistance from USAID.

On the other hand, several documents have been generated that are considered achievements in the region: “Reduction of the Greenhouse Effect through the Limitation and Absorption of CO<sub>2</sub> in Central America – Proposal: Plan for Preventing and Combating Forest Fires in Central America (May, 1996)”, “Forest and Agriculture Fires in Central America – Balance of 1998 (June, 1998)”, “Central American Strategy for Fire Management (1998 – 2003)”, “Forest and Agriculture Fires in Central America. Project Profile – Central American Action Plan for Fire Management (February, 1999)”.

### 2. Objective

- Inform on the actual situation in the region of Central America and Mexico with respect to forest fires
- Serve as basis for the groupwork of the Regional Network of Central America and Mexico (21–22 October 2004) and the Pan-American Wildland Fire Conference (23 October 2004).

### 3. Statistics

The year 1998 introduced a critical period for forest fires in Central America and Mexico; this was due to the effects of El Niño in which Mexico (849,000 ha), Guatemala (679,000 ha) and Honduras (97,000 ha) were the most affected (refer to the following table).

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Table 1: Area in hectares burned by wildland fire in each country in the region of Central America and Mexico.

Country / Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Honduras	96,623	54,986	63,593	82,356	63,442	56,655	8,409
Panama	77,586	3,397	2,204	4,247	3,739	17,765	1,723.29*
El Salvador	2,041	359	1,700	1,613	1,261	3,661	3,497
Nicaragua	161,684	25,227	92,355	24,318	26,148	27,448	33,252
Mexico	849,000	230,000	263,000	137,000	198,500	322,500	82,000
Costa Rica	64,893	11,192	36,896	57,511	50,337	32,372	35,228
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Guatemala	679,000	10,600	53,400	22,150	22,387	425,000	6,703

\* Note: in Panama 1,723.29 ha corresponded to forest fires, while agricultural fires ascended to 6,292.98 ha during 2004.

2003 was another critical year, where the countries of Central America and Mexico were seriously affected, in spite of the fact that the capacity to respond had been increased in comparison with 1998.

#### 4. Trends in wildland fire occurrences

Governments in the Central America and Mexico region have become increasingly interested in the prevention and control of forest fires; however when the issue is translated into political discussion, much of the efforts and initiatives do not achieve concrete results.

At present, in the region there exists a base of trained human resources, timely detection systems, minimum equipment and tools for control, among others.

In general in Central America and Mexico, during recent years there has been an emphasis on fire control, and consequently it is now pretended to strengthen local fire prevention strategies.

#### 5. Projected tendencies

After analyzing that the underlying causes of incidence of forest fires corresponds to social inequality, devaluation of natural resources, lack of forest culture, inadequate policies, lack of forest resources available for the use of communities through sustainable management, among others; adding that more than 98% of all fires are started by man, the dynamic variable of forest fires and climate change, globalization; we can conclude that unless the management of forest resources is decentralized to rural communities and to social organizations, and they will receive direct economic benefits, fires will continue to be a problem.

It is part of the region's perspectives to put more emphasis on forest fire prevention actions based on the specific social and cultural aspects of each area.

From the technical point of view, to increase and adapt training processes to the level of each country, to improve the planning processes, organization and detection systems to reduce response times and to implement formal systems for predicting forest fires at the regional level.

As part of the process, decentralization of fire prevention and control actions to the level of communities, municipalities and civil organizations are also key aspects; but accompanied by strengthening technical capacities, resources and equipment.

#### 6. Fire management priorities

Regional priorities include fire prevention; decentralization to the community and municipal level and strengthening those local structures through training, equipment, tools, etc.; increasing the technical level for predicting, detecting and monitoring forest fires; increasing the assistance of aerial control, and defining a strategy for strengthening the technical capacity of the involved countries.

## **7. Established cooperation agreements for forest fire management and their state of development**

The Central America and Mexico region has a number of agreements and/or conventions for cooperation on forest fires:

- a) The Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD) has officially established the Central American Council of Forests and Protected Areas (CCAB/AP) who nominated members of the Commission on Forest Pests and Fires in Central America and who have invited Mexico to participate; integrating the Central America and Mexico Regional Network on Forest Fires and Pests.
- b) Satellite detection for forest fires Mexico (CONABIO) and Guatemala, Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras (bilateral agreements between Mexico and each country).
- c) Satellite detection for forest fires between Nicaragua and Honduras.
- d) Under the bilateral convention between Mexico and Guatemala and the Commission on Forest Pests and Fires in Central America and Mexico, two international Mesoamerican courses for forest fire protection have been developed (the first was held from 11-22 November 2002 and the second from 30 November – 13 December 2003).
- e) At present an action plan for fire management in Central America and Southern Mexico has been defined, framed within the regional strategy and is beginning to be executed with the assistance of USAID.
- f) In the “Trifinio” forest area, established in the border area between Guatemala, Salvador and Honduras, activities for forest fire prevention and control are being developed.
- g) In frontier areas there are activities to prevent and control forest fires between countries that belong to the Central America and Mexico Regional Network on Forest Fires and Pests.
- h) In Central America there are training processes: one supported by OFDA/USAID and the other supported by Mexico, “Mesoamerican Course on Forest Fires.”
- i) In the border area between Guatemala and Mexico, there exists coordinated management of emergencies.
- j) There is an emergency coordination agreement between Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama.

## **8. Suggestions for strengthening regional and bilateral cooperation**

- a) Strengthen satellite systems for detecting and monitoring fires in the region and start processes for predicting forest fires.
- b) Revise the regional forest fire management strategy for Central America and Mexico; and define and pronounce a Regional Forest Fire Management Policy, taking into account the Central American Regional Forest Strategy (EFCA), considered as a strategic framework for the forest sector for the next 25 years.
- c) That the member countries of the Central America and Mexico Regional Network on Forest Fires and Pests give priority and provide resources to the problem of forest fires.
- d) Develop bilateral and regional cooperation mechanisms and projects that develop forest fire management, in order to be able to present such proposals for international financial and technical assistance.
- e) Now that the Central America and Mexico Regional Network on Forest Fires and Pests has officially been created, it is necessary to define objectives, procedures, cooperation formats, work mechanisms, protocols.
- f) Create channels and procedures for communications that are easily implementable among the networks in Central America and Mexico with those in South America, in the Caribbean; in North America; and with the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC).
- g) Develop a short term work plan at level of the regional networks, with roles and responsibilities, defining dates for presenting results.