

Pan-American Conference on Wildland Fire

San José, Costa Rica, 23 October 2004

Need for a Coordinated Pan-American and International Approach in Wildland Fire Management¹

Introduction

Over the past decade, many countries have witnessed a growing trend of excessive fire application in land-use systems and an increasing occurrence of wildfires of extreme severities. Sometimes these wildland fires have transnational impacts, for example smoke pollution and its impacts on human health and safety; loss of biodiversity; or site degradation at landscape level leading to desertification, flooding, and reduced food security. The depletion of terrestrial carbon by fires burning under extreme conditions in some vegetation types is an important factor in causing disturbance in the global carbon cycle.

Increasing vulnerability of human populations living in or around forest environments – in the wildland-residential / urban interface – has been noted throughout the Americas. Projected trends of climate change impacts on vegetation cover and fire regimes, as well as observed demographic and socio-economic trends suggest that wildland fire may continue to play a major role in the destruction of vegetation cover resulting, among other, in increasing occurrence of weather-related secondary ecological and humanitarian disasters such as mass movement of soil cover and extreme flooding.

In other words, increasingly severe wildland fires are contributing to climate change; and climate change is contributing to increasingly severe wildland fires.

The Challenge

Fire is an important natural process in many ecosystems, and people have traditionally used fire for millennia as a land-management tool. The challenge is to develop informed policy and management capabilities that recognize both the beneficial and traditional roles of fire, while reducing the incidence and extent of uncontrolled burning and its adverse impacts.

This trend is stirring the international community to address the problem collaboratively. The development of informal partnerships, joint projects and formal agreements among governments and between government and non-governmental institutions is essential to enable nations to develop sustainable fire management capabilities.

In order to share human and technical resources in wildland fire management, a number of collaborative activities have been initiated throughout the Americas and the Caribbean during recent years. Representatives from throughout the region have initiated and – where already existing – expanded networking structures. Regional Wildland Fire Networks in South America, Mesoamerica and the Caribbean tied to the Global Wildland Fire Network are currently receiving support by FAO to develop a regional cooperation strategy in wildland fire management.

In order to further develop cooperation throughout the Western Hemisphere and globally, the Pan-American Conference on Wildland Fire is calling for strengthening international cooperation. The conference is sponsored by two statutory bodies of FAO, the Latin America and Caribbean Forestry Commission (LACFC) and the North American Forest Commission (NAFC), with co-sponsorship by the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC). It is hosted by the Government of Costa Rica.

¹ Report prepared by the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

The Global Context

The primary responsibility for preventing unplanned wildland fire and for managing planned fire lies with governments. The efforts of countries can be supported by international organizations and non-governmental organizations. Several agencies and programmes of the United Nations system work on problems related to wildland fire management:

- FAO: sustainable forest management, fire management and community involvement, promotion of international cooperation in wildland fire management; jointly with GFMC conducting Global Forest Fire Assessments (FRA 2000 and 2005), publication of Fire Management Guidelines for Temperate and Boreal Forests, Wildland Fire Management Terminology,
- Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) with United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP): coordination of international response to wildland fire emergencies;
- World Health Organization (WHO): protection of human health against adverse effects of vegetation fire, smoke pollution;
- World Meteorological Organization (WMO): early warning of precursors leading to critical fire situations.

In addition, several international conventions are mandated to advise and assist countries to protect global vegetation cover and ecosystem functioning, i.e. the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

UN agencies and convention secretariats have limited resources and are generally unable to fulfil all of the requests from countries for assistance and technology transfer to promote sustainable fire management. Collaboration among governments and civil society, including bilateral and multilateral cooperative efforts, is crucial.

Given the diversity of responsibilities within and outside the UN system, an international platform was created to facilitate a global policy dialogue. A *Working Group on Wildland Fire* was established in 2001 within the Inter-Agency Task Force for Disaster Reduction under the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR).

Following the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) (Johannesburg, South Africa, 2002) which provided the groundwork for the development of an action programme to reduce the negative effects of wildland fires on environment and humanity, an International Wildland Fire Summit was held in Sydney, Australia in October 2003. The theme of the summit was "Fire Management and Sustainable Development: Strengthening International Cooperation to Reduce the Negative Impacts of Fire on Humanity and the Global Environment".

The Summit called for enhancing international cooperation in wildland fire management through agreements on common principles, procedures and a common global strategy. Several modalities exist for international cooperation, such as voluntary agreements, UN General Assembly resolutions, and international conventions.

Based on the recommendations of the Summit and the outputs of the UN-ISDR Working Group of Wildland Fire, the Global Wildland Fire Network became instrumental to facilitate the regional and global dialogue. The UN-ISDR Wildland Fire Advisory Group (the successor arrangement of the Working Group of Wildland Fire) and the Global Fire Monitoring Center (serving as convener and secretariat) are acting as facilitators for this process.

FAO, ISDR and GFMC agreed on a strategic "Framework for the Development of the International Wildland Fire Accord" (May 2004). To support this process a number of regional consultations and conferences were held in 2004 (Northeast Asia, Eastern Mediterranean / Balkans / Near East / Central Asia, Baltic, Sub-Sahara Africa, South America). The Pan-American Conference on Wildland Fire (23 October 2004), together with the meetings of the Regional Wildland Fire Networks of South America, Mesoamerica and the Caribbean (21-22 October 2004), is the last round of regional consultations before the FAO Ministerial Meeting on Forests at which wildland fire will be a major agenda item (Rome, 14 March 2005): Ministers responsible for forests will consider a proposal directed from the regions to the international community requesting support for a coordinated effort in international

cooperation in wildland fire management. The outcome of the Pan-American Conference on Wildland Fire will be reported to the FAO Ministerial Meeting on Forests.

Expected Outputs of the Pan-American Conference on Wildland Fire

Based on regional wildland fire reports (South, Central and North America, and the Caribbean) and the outcomes of the discussions of the Regional Wildland Fire Networks during the days preceding the conference, heads of national forestry and wildland fire organizations in the Western Hemisphere and representatives of organizations that are interested in the improved management of wildland fire will discuss and may consider the endorsement of a draft declaration developed by national representatives on the day before the conference

- supporting a commitment to a regional strategy for improved management, prevention and suppression of wildland fire
- calling for strengthened international cooperation on wildland fire at bilateral, multilateral and global levels

Additional background materials available prior to the Conference

- Agenda for the Conference
- Schedule for Regional Wildland Fire Network Meetings 21 – 22 October
- Regional syntheses reports from South, Central and North America, and the Caribbean
- Status Paper of the Global Wildland Fire Network
- Framework for the Development of the International Wildland Fire Accord
- Communiqué of the International Wildland Fire Summit (including strategic agreements)

Reports to be prepared on site

- Short reports of the Regional Wildland Fire Network Meetings 21-22 October
- Report of the joint meeting of the Regional Wildland Fire Networks, 22 October afternoon
- Draft text of the San José Declaration on International Cooperation in Wildland Fire Management, based on the meetings of the Regional Wildland Fire Networks on 21-22 October 2004 and discussed at the Friday afternoon joint meeting
- Summary report on the Pan-American Conference on Wildland Fire, 23 October 2004