Pan-American Conference on Wildland Fire

San José, Costa Rica, 23 October 2004

Summary of the Wildland Fire Situation in North America [1]

1. Summary of recently observed trends of wildland fire occurrence in the region

Throughout the US and Canada, the trends in wildfire occurrence are similar. Fires are growing larger, causing more damage, threatening structures, property, and lives, and are more costly to suppress. The intensity and extent of damage in any given season varies with the weather, but the overall trend is an increase in burned area and a greater variability between annual area burned and fire intensities.

Canadians report about 8,500 fires per year with an average annual area burned of 2.5 million ha. The variability in area burned ranges from as few as 300,000 ha to as much as 7.5 million ha annually. The past 4 years in the US, five states have reported their largest single fire since records have been kept.

In both countries, more people are living, working, and recreating in or adjacent to extremely flammable forest fuels causing a significant increase in fire protection costs. There is a growing recognition that changing demographics, droughts, and climate change, are all contributing to the problem. In many areas of the western US, after decades of successful fire suppression, insects and disease have become more widespread and some forest ecosystems have unnatural fuel loadings and structures. As a result, there are millions of acres more susceptible to large and damaging wildland fires.

Both Canada and the US are very successful at fire suppression. In Canada, 97% of all fires are extinguished before they reach 200 ha. In the US, using a slightly different definition, initial attack is successful on 98.5% of the fires. It is clear, however, that it is neither physically possible nor ecologically desirable to eliminate all fire from the landscape.

2. Projected trends

Most fire managers and researchers indicate the upward trends in fire occurrence, area burned, and suppression expenditures will continue. There is increasing concern in both countries that global warming will become a significant factor in increasing fire activity.

3. Priority Issues for fire management

US priorities are defined in the National Fire Plan (NFP) and the Healthy Forest Initiative. The NFP recognizes the need to continue to suppress unwanted fire and protect property and citizens, but also provides for increased efforts in prevention, education, and restoration of fire prone ecosystems. Millions of acres of fuel treatment projects and extensive efforts in community involvement are planned in order to treat large landscapes that will result in healthier forest and less damaging fires.

In September 2004, the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers agreed to the development of a new Canadian Wildland Fire Strategy based on the principles of risk management and hazard mitigation. This strategy will seek a balanced approach to public safety, forest protection and health, and fire management expenditures that maintains a strong and effective fire suppression organization, but also includes innovative hazard mitigation, preparedness, and recovery programs. The Strategy recognizes the need for responsibility to be shared among property owner, industries, and local, provincial, and federal governments.

[1] Report prepared by the Fire Management Working Group (FMWG) of the North American Forestry Commission (NAFC)

4. Established international cooperative arrangements

The US and Canada are participants in a wide range of international programs. Both Canada and the US have mutual aid border agreement covering all international borders for mutual aid in fire management. The agreements between the US and Canada and the US and Mexico also provide for cooperation in all fire management activities anywhere in the countries, as well as technical exchanges and mechanisms for annual operating plans and organizational meeting.

In addition to the border agreements, the US and Canada are finalizing arrangements with the States of Australia and New Zealand to provide fire suppression resources during critical fire season. Over the past four years, Australian and New Zealand fire fighters have been deployed in Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and other Western States, and US fire fighters were sent to the State of Victoria in Australia.

Over the past four decades there has also been extensive cooperation between Canada and the US in forest fire science and technology. Both formal and informal working relationships have evolved resulting in significant synergies in certain fields such as fire danger rating, fire behavior, and climate change.

5. Status of Regional Networking arrangements

The Fire Management Working Group (FMWG) of the North American Forestry Commission (NAFC) serves as the Regional Network for North America (including Mexico). Established in 1962, the FMWG meets annually. The membership includes key groups and agencies in all three countries. For the US, all Federal and State wildland fire agencies are represented as well as the National Fire Protection Association.

Canada's members are the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, the Canadian Forest Service (including fire research), and the Provincial Fire agencies. Mexico is represented by fire managers from the Forest Commission (CONAFOR), fire research, and a non-governmental forest ecology group active in fire management and fire research projects.

During the 2004 annual meeting, the FMWG agreed to update and revise their web site to provide better information and easier access to other North American links. The web site will be designed as the "first stop" for other regional network members to access information in the three countries. The FMWG also agreed to work with the Regional Wildland Fire Networks of South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, as well as with the Global Wildland Fire Network, and develop a program of cooperation based on mutual needs and interests.