

Concept Note

UNFF Country-Led Initiative

Thematic area I: Forest Fires / Wildfires

Date: Thursday, 26th October 2023

Time: 10:30-17:30 IST

Event

UN Forum on Forests Country-Led Initiative (CLI) hosted by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India; to be held 26-28 October 2023, Forest Research Institute (FRI), Dehradun, India.

Background

The nineteenth session of the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF19) will be held from 6 to 10 May 2024 at United Nations Headquarters, New York. In this context, the government of India is hosting a country led initiative (CLI) to contribute to the discussion of the UNFF19. The CLI will focus on two thematic areas; Forest Fires/ Wildfires and Forest Certification & Sustainable Forest Management.

The CLI will promote sharing of good practices on these thematic areas to support global actions in advancing the Global Forest Goals of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF). The CLI also aims to tap into the experience gained and the lessons learnt in the thematic areas to identify recommendations for the consideration of the Forum at its 19th Session.

Thematic area I : Forest Fires / Wildfires¹

Context

In recent years, the world has witnessed an alarming increase in the scale and duration of wildfires, leading to profound impacts on biodiversity, ecosystem services, human well-being, livelihoods, and national economies. Forested areas have been particularly affected, with approximately 100 million hectares, equivalent to 3% of the world's forest area, affected by fires every year.

The severity of these fires has been exemplified by numerous high-profile incidents, resulting in unhealthy air quality and significant loss of human lives, wildlife, ecosystem services and property, including wildfire disasters in the northern hemisphere this summer.

The G20 Environment and Climate Ministers' meeting held at Chennai, India on 28th July 2023 highlighted that wildfires contribute to global carbon emissions and air pollution and that high-intensity wildfires may affect the conservation and regeneration of ecosystems and their functions and services can exacerbate climate change, land degradation and biodiversity loss.

¹ FAO is applying the terminology wildfire, as defined in UNEP 2022 (Spreading like wildfire): "an unusual or extraordinary free-burning vegetation fire which may be started maliciously, accidentally, or through natural means, that negatively influences social, economic, or environmental values", in spite of "forest fire" which is related to area where the fire is spreading. However, in the context of this CLI the terms forest fire and wildfire are used synonymously.

The G20 recognized the importance of preventing and managing wildfires and restoring wildfire-impacted land as appropriate to help achieve SDG 15, and global land degradation targets.

Given the escalating frequency and intensity of such events, it has become imperative to develop a comprehensive and long-term strategy to prevent and combat wildfires and initiate ecosystem restoration in fire-affected areas. This CLI provides an opportunity to foster collaboration, knowledge exchange, and the development of strategies for effective fire prediction, prevention, monitoring and management, including thinning, removal of hazardous fuels through controlled burns, traditional knowledge from indigenous groups and local communities, and ecosystem restoration, after catastrophic events, contributing to a sustainable and resilient land management less affected by fire.

Accordingly, there is a need to scale up efforts to enhance collaboration and action at local, regional, and international levels on the prevention, where appropriate and feasible, and reduction of impacts of wildfires and the restoration of wildfire-impacted land.

Major Reports and Analyses

This concept note was prepared noting the significant and useful global reports and efforts of recent years including:

- The Global Fire Management Hub, launched by FAO and UNEP at the 8th International Wildland Fire Conference (IWFC) in Porto, Portugal (2023)
- The Landscape Fire Governance Framework released at the 8th IWFC in Porto, Portugal (2023)
- OECD report (2023), Taming Wildfires in the Context of Climate Change; all contained information on damage and loss for the impacts of wildfires on people and on the environment.
- UNEP-GRID Arendal publication “Spreading like Wildfire – The Rising Threat of Extraordinary Landscape Fires” (2022)
- UNFF Background Paper (2021), and UN/DESA Policy Brief #111: Wildfires – a growing concern for sustainable development
- World Bank Policy Note (2020),
- Global Fire Challenges in a Warming World, IUFRO Occasional Paper 32 (2018). <https://www.iufro.org/news/article/2019/01/23/occasional-paper-32-global-fire-challenges-in-a-warming-world/>

Key Points

Disasters and wildfires have been identified in the UN Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF) and its Global Forest Goals (GFGs) as one of the indicative thematic areas for action. Target 4 of GFG1 also includes a reference to disasters.

Human activities are responsible for most fire activity, up to 99% in some regions. Global area burned has been decreasing for several decades, and yet the location of fire activity has shifted where large-scale human pressure has caused major environmental changes, with disastrous consequences. Wildfire events classified as disasters represented 3.5% of recorded disasters between 1998 and 2017, and though there is no clear data to show the increase in fatalities and losses as a trend, there is a net sharp rise in suppression costs. This rise results from the multiplication of values at risk located in fire-prone landscapes and the extremely high costs of suppression. Wildfires also bring environmental disasters and losses to ecosystems, including by preventing vital ecosystem services and benefits to society, such as drinking water.

Ongoing climate change and other environmental issues linked to globalized human activities will make fire disasters more likely. There is a general scientific agreement that many regions will experience drier and warmer weather conditions—a trend visible already with 2023 seeing the hottest July, August and September relative to the period 1990-2021. Harsher climate conditions will also

make post-fire forest regeneration more difficult, threatening communities depending on forests for their livelihood. Expanding human footprint will also bring more ignitions, thereby enhancing fire activity and increasing community vulnerability. Over time, land management by fire has changed, for better and for worse, depending on historical and natural settings. The new reality is being characterized by large-scale human impacts on nature, leading to biodiversity loss and climate change and is now causing pervasive, detrimental, and complex changes to fire activity, leading to an increase in fire-caused disasters. Beyond direct loss of life and infrastructures, there is now increasing recognition of the long-term effects of fire-caused disasters on mental health, ecosystem services, and livelihood.

Given the diversity of social, economic, and environmental settings driving fire activity around the world, there is no one-size-fits-all, meaning that best management practices working in a given place might not work somewhere else. In this sense, the worldwide wildfire “problem” can be seen as a wicked problem—one of these challenges that are so complex that they potentially remain problematic forever. Given our globalized, high-tech, better-informed, and rapidly changing world, wildfires can impact many facets of the system; however, there are immense possibilities for new, innovative, holistic and versatile approaches to existing and pressing fire management needs that are tailored to local issues. Importantly, keys to success are working with communities, thinking of fire as a solution in itself for restoring nature, and making sure fire management is integrated within larger strategies targeting ecosystem services, nature restoration and climate change adaptation.

The following recommendations have been synthesised from the reports listed earlier, starting with the UNFF16 Background Paper and noting that many, if not most, recommendations arise multiple times across those materials.

Synthesised Recommendations

The recommendations revolve around the concept of Integrated Fire Management (IFM) and its implementation. FAO describes IFM as a holistic view to address fire issues that considers biological, environmental, cultural, social, economic and political interactions. It implies a science-based, iterative planning process involving cycles of analysis, plan formulation, implementation and evaluation that allows for continuous learning and adjustments. It means working across sectors, with all stakeholder groups and administrative levels, thereby integrating bottom-up and top-down aspects; and combining local and scientific knowledge. IFM also acknowledges that “natural” fires are needed in some cases to preserve landscapes functions and ecosystem health. Essentially, IFM pushes for a shift from emphasis on Readiness and Response (suppression - firefighting) to strongly increased focus on Risk Reduction (prevention) based on Review and Analysis and Restoration (increasing landscape resilience). Stakeholders must realize that it is a long-term process and that they must be “patient for results, but not wait for strategic action.”

For the past two decades, Integrated Fire Management (IFM), has been advanced as the most efficient and logical path towards fire disaster risk reduction. Based on the IFM framework, several major recommendations to reducing fire disaster risks can be made: learning to live with local fire conditions; reducing the vulnerability of highly valued resources and assets; acknowledging traditional and indigenous fire knowledge; adopting a responsible, science-informed, proactive fire strategy; promoting good governance; promoting capacity building for local communities; promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing; promoting long-term monitoring and data collection; promoting new technologies and innovative approaches to fire risk management.

These recommendations, delineated by sector, include—but are not limited to:

1. The Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) and its Members should promote an integrated fire management approach as put forward in the publications noted and framed up by FAO in its Fire Management Strategy.

2. Members of the CPF, as well as UNFF Member States, and other agencies such as UNDRR should support integration of Indigenous, traditional, and contemporary fire management practices into policy.
3. Reducing the risk of extreme wildfires relies on scaling up risk prevention measures and understanding where the focus must be. National governments should invest in the development and maintenance of national fire databases to provide the recording and reporting of fire size, cause, date, costs, damage and loss, pre-existing mitigation efforts, etc. Reliable data collected by governmental agencies can produce critical information and knowledge helping understand the evolution of fire regimes and disaster risks. Fire statistics for all countries should be collected through a robust system for fire monitoring, that underpins a focus on reducing risks of wildfires.
4. Assess the full wildfire costs and invest in planning, prevention, and recovery, not just response: One assessment estimated the annualized economic burden from wildfire for the United States to be between \$71.1 billion to \$347.8 billion (\$2016 US). Most nations do not have any assessment. Commonly, more than half the expenditures related to wildfires are for response, while planning typically receives just 0.2 per cent of the total budget for wildfires.
5. Rebalance investments spent on Response (suppression) to proactive Risk Reduction and Risk Management. Countries have enhanced their wildfire risk monitoring capacities, strengthening weather and fire monitoring systems and response capacities, with a particular focus on strengthening wildfire suppression. Despite this, increasing wildfire size, frequency and severity have highlighted the limits of emergency response measures. Wildfires become uncontrollable when they exceed the limits of suppression. Given the limitations of fire suppression and a future predicted to have longer fire seasons and more severe fires due to increasingly worse fire weather conditions, making targeted investments in preparedness measures now will yield significant benefits.
6. Strengthen international and regional cooperation on integrated fire management. Learn from others, best practice is out there: Governments and communities need to proactively learn from each other's experiences, seeking out best practices and inspiring examples from around the world with the sharing of data, information, and analysis to improve forecasting and learning. The FAO and UNEP has launched the Global Fire Management Hub which provides platform for strengthening international and regional cooperation.
7. The role of media is critical for advancing IFM, so it is important that reporting is done objectively. In particular, it would be beneficial to switch from an apocalyptic and military-based narrative to a discourse on successful fire management initiatives and positive effects fire can have when use with care. Fire disasters happen because of underlying social, economic, and political issues. Terms such as "megafires" and "gigafires" should be generally avoided. They have no scientific basis and tend to downplay the pervasive and influential role of human intervention in the landscape, suggesting that climate change is the dominant cause.

Various actors, stakeholders and players in fire management around the world are continuously producing data, information, reports, tools, approaches and products in many different fire sub-topics, including new and emerging research and technology and including in the past resulting in a large body of material. This has and is tending to create a disproportionate relationship between knowledge produced and its implementation, such that what is applied in the field and by local people on the ground can be years behind what is available.

Countries, their agencies and stakeholders need means and opportunity to access up-to-date and ready-to-implement frameworks, actions and practices to provide appropriate but effective and financially sustainable fire management services, starting with simple approaches.

FAO and UNEP have launched² the Global Fire Management Hub during the 8th International Wildland Fire Conference (IWFC) in Portugal (16-19 May 2023) to respond to these challenges and create collaborative connections and mutual support to enhance and implement IFM.

The aim of the Global Fire Management Hub is to strengthen countries' capacities to implement integrated fire management to reduce the negative impacts of wildfires on livelihoods, landscapes and global climate.

The Fire Hub will bring together key partners working on integrated fire management and will provide a forum, including Member States, partners and stakeholders, for a more systematic and seamless transition of fire management processes and procedures, lessons learned, methods and technologies along with training and exchanges of expertise. The Fire Hub consists of five initial pillars:

- knowledge sharing,
- capacity building,
- fire risk assessment and early warning,
- wildfire resilient communities,
- and policy support.

Ongoing and upcoming financial contributions from countries will support meetings and technical workshops in the framework of the Fire Hub. The first workshop to prepare a roadmap for the Global Fire Management Hub will bring together partners, donors, and agencies will be held in November 2023.

Thanks to the generous offer from the Government of Germany, FAO and partners are moving forward with the establishment of the Global Fire Management Hub through a series of technical workshops that will provide guidance on:

- the integration of the 25-year work experience of the Global Fire Monitoring Centre (GFMC) in Freiburg and the related networks and partners into the Fire Hub;
- how the Fire Hub can support the implementation of the Landscape Fire Governance Framework launched at the 8th IWFC;
- options for advocating and including integrated fire management in international forest-related dialogues.

The good practices and lessons learned gathered during this CLI will contribute to the knowledge pillar of the Fire Hub and will support global actions in advancing the Global Forest Goals of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF).

Expected Outcomes and Modalities of the Session

The session is expected to address the needed paradigm shift from mere fire-fighting to an integrated fire management with emphasis on prevention and post-fire landscape restoration. In this regard, the session aims to achieve the following:

- Increased understanding among participants of the concept of “living with fire in a warming world and avoid big damage to nature and people;”
- Policies and measures required for implementing integrated fire management;
- Actions – in the short- and medium term - required to manage the transition towards the new paradigm of fire prevention and landscape restoration; and
- How to make best use of the evolving Global Fire Management Hub.

² <https://www.fao.org/forestry/news/100706/en/>

The Session will start with opening remarks followed by a brief address by the moderator, to be followed by a short presentation to set the scene. Then three panel discussions will be conducted with each centered around a key question crucial to the session's expected outcomes. Presentations during the panels will be limited to six minutes each. Following each panel, the floor will be opened for interactive discussions and additional insights from participants on the thematic question. There will be no predetermined list of speakers. Experts desiring to contribute should request the floor. At the end of the session, the moderator will summarize the key points of the discussions and deliver concluding remarks.

Meeting Schedule

Day 1: Thursday, 26th October, 2023

Venue: Convocation Hall, Forest Research Institute (FRI) Dehradun

Time (IST)	Session	Speakers
1st Plenary Session (Forest Fire/ Wildfire)		
10:30 - 10:38	Moderation by UNFF Secretariat	Ms. Juliette Biao, Director UNFF
10:38 – 11:00	Setting the scene	FAO and IUFRO (Dr Peter F. Moore, FAO Fire Management and GFOI CLP Consultant and Mr Sanjeev K Chauhan, Director of Research, IUFRO)
11:00 - 11:40	Panel Discussion on "How to live with fire in a warming world?"	Presentations by: 1) New Zealand (Mr. Russell Dale) 2) Madagascar (Ms. Mevanarivo Zo Elia, National UNFF Focal Point) 3) Colombia (Mr Sergio Salazar Alzate, Coordinator of Environmental Affairs, Ministry of External Affairs) 4) Morocco (Mr MHARZI ALAOUI Hicham, Chief of Department of Climate and Environmental Risks within the National Agency for Water and Forest.

		<p>5) Republic of Congo (Dieudonné SITA Director of Forests UNFF Focal Point Ministry of Forestry Economy Republic of Congo</p>
11:40 - 12:45	Interactive session	
12:45 - 14:00	Lunch Break	
14:00 - 14:40	<p>Panel Discussion on "What policies are needed for implementing integrated fire management and for managing the transition towards the new paradigm of fire prevention?"</p>	Presentations by: 1) India (Mr. K. Ravichandran, Director, Indian Institute of Forest Management) 2) Portugal (Mr. Tiago Oliveira, Chairman of Portuguese Agency for Integrated Rural Fire Management) 3) Malawi (Ms. Tuntufye Teleza Mboma, Ministry of Natural Resource and Climate Change) 4) Botswana (Ms Tshegofatso Jane Shadrack, Department of Forestry and Range Resources and the Ministry of Environment) 5) Russia (Mr Andrey Eritsov, Deputy Head of the Aerial Forest Fire Protection Centre)
14:40 - 15:30	Interactive session	
15:30 - 16:00	Tea break	
16:00 - 16:40	<p>Panel Discussion on "How to make best use of the newly developed Global Fire Management Hub?"</p>	Presentations by: 1) Nigeria (Mr. Aiwuyo Christopher O, Deputy Director of Forestry, Federal Ministry of Environment) 2) South Africa Ms. Morongoa Suzan Leseke, Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment) 3) Spain (Ms. Elena Hernandez Parases, Head of Forest Fire Defense Area Service, General

		Directorate of Forestry Policy and Fight against Desertification, Ministry for the ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge)
16:40 - 17:20	Interactive Session	
17:20 - 17:30	Summary and concluding remarks by Moderator	