

# **International Wildland Fire Summit, 8 October 2003**

## **Background Document**

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### **UN-IDNDR World Conference for Natural Disaster Reduction Yokohama, Japan, 23-27 May 1994**

#### **Proposal for A Possible Role of the UN System in Fire Research and Wildfire Disaster Management**

Uncontrolled wildfires and prescribed fires occur in all vegetation zones of the world. It is estimated that fires annually affect up to

- o 10-15 million hectares of boreal and temperate forest and other lands
- o 20-40 million hectares of tropical rain forests due to forest conversion activities and escaped agricultural burnings
- o 500-1000 million hectares of tropical and subtropical savannas, woodlands, and open forests

Only a minor part of these fires is caused by nature (lightning). Most of today's fires are caused by human activities. Some burning practices still follow the traditional rules of rural populations, and many ecosystems are well adapted to fire. The majority of fires, however, is in conflict with land-use priorities and other considerations, leading to

- o Ecological problems (vegetation degradation, erosion, loss of biodiversity)
- o Socio-economic problems (loss of human lives, loss of values-at-risk, especially in the wildland/residential interface, economic losses)
- o Environmental phenomena (affecting air quality and the global carbon cycle, contribution to elevated concentration of trace gases and aerosols, with consequences on the regional and global climate)

Wildfire disasters sometimes occur as a consequence of other natural disasters (e.g. after earthquakes, volcano eruptions), and fires may lead to subsequent natural disasters (e.g. landslides, flooding after soil exposure).

On an international base no system is available to monitor the extent and the consequences of vegetation fires on a global scale. Most countries in the developing world do not have adequate infrastructures, experience and hardware to manage wildfire disasters. Although bilateral assistance agreements exist and a number of field projects in fire management are carried out through national and international organizations, there are no facilities and/or mechanisms available to provide the necessary disaster management assistance on an international level on a permanent and quick-response base. Besides the ECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire which has a restricted mandate and a regionally restricted area of influence, or some ongoing and planned regional fire research campaigns under the IGBP scheme, neither the UN system nor any other organization is providing adequate structures and mechanisms with international (global) responsibilities in fire management.

In order to take the first necessary steps for clarifying the global importance of wildfires and for building international structures and mechanisms for mutual fire management support, it is recommended to entrust the ECE/FAO Team of Specialists on Forest Fire, in close cooperation with FAO, UNESCO, IDNDR, and UNDRO, to develop a plan for the establishment of a UN-sponsored Global Fire Research and Management Facility which includes a Global Vegetation

Fire Information System and the capabilities to provide support on request to any nation in fire management and prevention and management of wildfire disasters.