

Strategy to Enhance International Cooperation on Fire Management

The negative economic, social, and ecological impacts and costs of fire continue to escalate. This is due, at least in part, to the influence of global warming, climate change, population growth, and land-use change and demographics. Many fire-prone areas are experiencing record setting fire seasons with high costs, large areas burned and severe damage to natural resources and human developments. Unnatural and unwanted fires impact the global carbon cycle; threaten food security by destroying crops, livestock, and water supplies; and reduce livelihoods for the most vulnerable populations.

Global and regional cooperation is needed now more than ever before. As part of a global effort to address fire issues, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was requested by member countries to develop jointly with the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) and other partners, a strategy to enhance international cooperation on wildland fire. This Strategy outlines the context, scope, objectives, goals, and priorities to address this critical issue.

There are some encouraging signs that people from a wide range of interests and purposes have acknowledged the problems and are working together more and more. Global and regional networks are growing and working more effectively. International conferences, training sessions, and other symposia are attracting more attendees and more diverse audiences. Cross boundary assistance is expanding as more countries enter into bilateral agreements.

Fire management cannot be viewed as just a response to a threatening wildfire but as a total system of planning, preparedness, prevention, early warning, suppression, restoration, and monitoring. Fire management is not just addressing fires in forests. Free burning fires moving across a landscape of forests, woodlands, brush or bush, grass, or any type of vegetation even fields, agricultural and pasture areas, or other human built infrastructure are included. All fires that are uncontrolled, unmanaged, damaging in any sort of environment outside of cities and structures are included.

However, fire management includes planned or prescribed fires. Fires that are used for resource, cultural, or ecosystem management must be considered within the same context. In areas where fires are part of the natural or cultural cycle, they must be planned and managed within the holistic scope and context of a system. The same is true for fires within the rural-urban interface, the area where the human built environment comes together with the natural or rural environment.

The term gaining acceptance within the fire community to encompass all of these types of fire is wildland fire – but even that term does not portray the full meaning since a fire burning through cultural landscapes, rural agricultural areas, the rural urban interface fall within the scope of the strategy.

Response to fire is best when the management, response, and support are from local or national agencies and resources. When response is delayed, fires that could be easily managed and suppressed become too large, too severe, and too complex for any response, no matter how technically advanced or well financed. The basis of this strategy is the development, support and assistance to local forces and organizations so that they are the primary solution to local fire problems and become the cornerstone in the management of fires.

The Strategy is built on four pillars: Global Assessment; Review of International Cooperation; Voluntary Guidelines encompassing principles and strategic actions; and the Actions Alliance. The assessment provides data and analysis of the fire situation globally and is a basis for understanding the scope of the issues and indicates areas of priority for action. The review of international cooperation is an inventory of existing efforts and highlights areas where greater and collaborative efforts are needed. The voluntary guidelines with the strategic actions present an outline of a comprehensive and technically sound fire management program. The Alliance is the mechanism and partnership that promotes implementation and understanding.

Strategic Objective

To strengthen international cooperation in wildland fire management to enable communities, local agencies, and national organizations to implement effective, efficient, and appropriate fire management programs and reduce the detrimental impact of fires on food security, health, livelihoods, resources, ecosystems, and the global environment, atmosphere and climate.

Goals

- Develop systems and processes to collect and analyze high quality data in support of problem recognition, identification of critical areas, and the early warning and monitoring of potential catastrophic fire situations.
- Provide mechanisms to distribute information, provide technical assistance and training, leverage the capabilities of local or regional groups, and provide resources during unexpected outbreaks of catastrophic fire.
- Encourage acceptance of the concept and term “fire management”, a comprehensive, integrated system including planning, preparedness, prevention, early warning, suppression, restorations, and monitoring.
- Promote the principles and the use of the strategic actions in the *Fire Management: Voluntary Guidelines* in governance, education, guidance, benchmarking, cooperation, and advocacy related to all aspects of fire management.

Priorities for Implementation

- Collaborate with all appropriate partners to advance the strategy's goals;
- Improve data collection and analysis to enhance problem definition and prioritization of action;
- Promote the establishment of clear and comprehensive policies, legal and institutional frameworks at the local and national level;
- Support the mechanisms for local, national, and regional cooperation, and bi-lateral and multilateral agreements;
- Increase capacity, particularly in developing countries, at the national and local level through training and technical assistance for community based fire management, the Incident Command System, and other high priority local needs.

The Strategy cannot be successful without the committed participation of groups and organizations with an interest and role in fire management. This is not a FAO strategy, but a strategy that FAO was asked to develop in collaboration with countries and international partners. Governmental and non-government organizations and agencies, and academic institutions organized in Regional Wildland Fire Networks operating collectively under the UNISDR Global Wildland Fire Network are playing an increasing role in facilitating cooperation in fire management between neighbouring countries and the development of local to national capacity in fire management.

As a result of the interdependence among all partners, the first and most pressing priority is to engage the international community in a process to promote the strategy. Each partner must develop individual or joint strategic implementation plans for the goals and priorities based on their individual and collective areas of interest and comparative advantage. Every interested partner must be encouraged to become actively engaged in a collaborative process for the benefit of communities, local agencies, and national organizations in the development of effective, efficient, and appropriate fire management programs.