

**Report of the joint meeting of the Near East Network on Forest Health and Invasive
Species and the Near East Network on Forest Wildland Fires
Zoom meeting, 16 November 2020**

I. Introduction and opening of the meeting

1. The joint meeting of the Near East Network on Forest Health and Invasive Species and the Near East Network on Forest and Wildland Fires was held on 16th of November 2020. Considering the COVID-19 lockdown situation, the meeting was held virtually via Zoom. The meeting was attended by 39 participants, including networks focal points, NEFRC Chairman and Vice Chairman as well as FAO staff at country offices, RNE and Headquarter. (see *Annex 1*: list of participants).
2. Mr. Yusuf Serengil, NEFRC Chairman, welcomed the participants and noted the importance of forest health and forest fire management and prevention in the NENA region highlighting the impact of Climate Change on natural resources management and wildland fires. NEFRC Chairman stressed also the need to increase resilience of ecosystems and local communities and to reinforce capacities of NENA countries and exchange of experiences on forest health and forest fire management and prevention.
3. NEFRC executive secretary recalled the purpose of the meeting noting difficulties faced to ensure an efficient functioning of both networks (NENFHIS and NENFIRE). The meeting objectives are listed below:
 - Revitalizing and strengthening the work of NENFHIS and NENFIRE. ,
 - Debating on the impacts of COVID-19 on forest protection (fire and health).
 - Introducing NENFHIS and NENFIRE websites and their functioning.

II. Results

Technical session

4. During the meeting, a technical session was dedicated to the impacts of COVID-19 on forest protection : “Fire management under COVID-19” and “Managing the threat of forest invasive species -lessons learned from the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic”
5. Regarding fire management, the presentation was focused on the different approaches adopted by countries highlighting the social distancing measures and difficulties encountered to efficiently implement a suppression intervention, fire operations, strategies and tactics established when responding to fires. Some lessons learned were also shared.
6. The presentation on “Managing the threat of forest invasive species -lessons learned from the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic” focused mainly on comparison between COVID-19 management and forest invasive species management highlighting the importance of monitoring, surveillance, prevention and quarantine measures to reduce the spread of invasive species. Decline and diebacks in natural forests were also highlighted also

examples of some invasive insect pests such as the Western Conifer Seed Bug, *Leptoglossus occidentalis* that caused great damage to pine nut production in Lebanon and Tunisia and *Dactylopius opuntiae* Cochenille scale affecting now Cactus plantations in some countries of the Region. Since it is a transboundary issue, the presentation emphasized also on the importance of technical networks to facilitate exchange of information, raise awareness, improve control and surveillance through the implementation of phytosanitary measures and mobilize resources at regional level

Communication and exchange of experience

7. Website could be a very relevant tool to have active networks and working groups. As per NENFHIS and NENFIRE request, FAO is supporting the creation of 2 websites; one already created for the NENFHIS and the second one under finalization for NENFIRE. Thus, a session was dedicated to the websites introduction/reactivation and functioning. The presentation focused on the websites structure, criticalities and solutions for a better functioning highlighting options for collaboration. Regarding the NENFIRE website it was recommended that participants review the website and share their comments and any suggestions for improvements with FAO team.
8. A discussion and brainstorming session was devoted to the Networks (NENFHIS and NENFIRE) functioning, mandate and objectives highlighting the importance of the countries/ focal points' involvement and ownership to ensure the networks sustainability and added value (regular meetings, webinars, website update, regional project proposals, resource mobilization...).

III. Recommendations

9. Participants noted the complexity of managing forest health (mainly transboundary pests and invasive species) and fire especially with COVID-19 restrictions and preventive measures. They recommended to:
 - strengthen regional collaboration and coordination including at Mediterranean level through the establishment of working group on forest health under Silva Mediterranea;
 - share any relevant tool (such as guidelines, lessons learned,...) for better/efficient forest health and fire management under the COVID19 pandemic;
 - improve interaction within focal points, enhance communication and exchange of experiences at country, regional and international levels in order to report field activities in the relevant website;
 - create a D-group to involve more people interested in forest health and forest fire from research, development, academia (that would have valuable inputs and support in project formulation, country priorities...);
 - ensure harmonized information between member countries through the provision of harmonized tools and materials (project template, success story template...)
10. In that context, and in order to improve collaboration at country and regional levels, it was agreed to update the list of NENFHIS and NENFIRE focal points and to share a questionnaire that would define the appropriate way and sequence of interaction as well as priority topics of interest to member countries to be discussed during upcoming webinars.

11. Participants recalled also the importance of rangelands in the Near East Region and that NENFHIS activities include the whole forest ecosystem and recommended to reconsider/highlight rangelands invasive species issues in the NENFHIS activities.

IV. Conclusion

12. NEFRC Chairman thanked participants for their involvement and active discussions noting the importance of both networks for the region and recalled the main issues raised during the meeting mainly those related to the communication and websites. He then declared the closure of the meeting.