

Regional Session E: South Asia and Southeast Asia

Sevilla, 15 May 2007 (Tuesday), 16:00-20:00

Regional Fire Assessment and Conclusions and Recommendations for Discussion

I. Self-assessment of the fire situation and fire management capabilities

South Asia:

1. In all countries in the region, fire is used by the rural population as a traditional tool for clearing and managing agricultural and pasture lands. It is also used to facilitate the gathering of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) and in hunting and herding. Uncontrolled fires are common in the region, with a long and intense dry season. Many of these fires have the potential to cause major damages;
2. Consequences of uncontrolled fires in South Asia among others are serious degradation of forests, ecological changes, as well as deterioration of social and economical conditions in some land-use systems and natural vegetation types;
3. The South Asian region has diverse ecosystems, socio-economic and cultural settings and vegetation types resulting from a wide range of land-use systems and climatic conditions, consequently having diverse fire regimes and vulnerabilities; not all fires are destructive and fire management can be an essential part in ecosystem management;
4. There is a lack of existing regional capability in fire research and management, including monitoring, early warning and ecological and socio-economic impact assessment, and facilitating international cooperation in fire management;
5. There is increasing interest in Community-Based Fire Management (CBFiM) and the need for institutional and technological capability development at all levels;
6. There is high expectations from sustainable vegetation cover which helps to reduce poverty through livelihood support to rural populations;
7. The Regional South Asia Wildland Fire Network is the youngest member (founded in April 2007) of the UNISDR-Global Wildland Fire Network. So, it needs especial attention, support and enabling environment to keep pace with the other networks. At present, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka are represented in the network.

Southeast Asia

1. At the beginning of the 21st century the application of fire in land-use systems and wildfires in forests and other vegetation in the South East Asian region are still contributing to the degradation of the environment and the atmosphere, jeopardizing the sustainability of land-use systems, and threatening human populations, especially human health.
2. Major problems associated with the inappropriate use of fire include the loss of habitats and biodiversity in forests;
3. Peatland biomes are particularly threatened as a consequence of peatland conversion by fire to cash crop plantations, notably oil palm plantations;
4. Regional transboundary smoke pollution is a consequence of land-use fires and conversion burnings in all vegetation types of the region;

5. Sixty percent of world's tropical peatlands are found in South East Asia covering an estimated area of between 21 to 23 million ha. Peatland fires, as a result of peatland drainage and unsustainable management practices, have become a major regional problem that has negatively impacted human health, food production and biodiversity as well as contributed to global climate change. More than 2 million hectares of peatlands have burnt in the past 10 years resulting in thick smoke and haze blanketing the region inflicting damage worth an estimated USD9 billion.
6. Member Countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the international community have increased their efforts to reduce the occurrence and negative impacts of fires and the resulting transboundary haze pollution, among others, by the signing of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution in June 2002, which entered into force in November 2003;
7. There is good progress in the implementation of the Agreement, including continuous monitoring of fires and associated haze by the ASEAN Specialized Meteorological Centre in Singapore; development and operationalisation of a regional standard operating procedures (SOP) for monitoring, assessment and joint emergency response; simulation exercises to enhance coordination and communication mechanisms in joint emergency response; establishment of community fire brigades at the village level; development of an online inventory of available fire fighting resources in ASEAN Member Countries that could be made available in case of emergency; development and promotion of guidelines for "zero burning" and controlled burning practices; and a website to facilitate information sharing and dissemination.
8. ASEAN Member Countries have also adopted the ASEAN Peatland Management Initiative (APMI) to enhance peatland management in the region. Under this Initiative, ASEAN has developed the ASEAN Peatland Management Strategy (APMS) (2006-2020) to guide actions to sustainably manage peatlands and reduce fires and associated haze within the framework of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution;
9. A Panel of ASEAN Experts on Fire and Haze Assessment and Coordination has been established to undertake rapid assessment of the situation on the ground during potential or impending critical periods of fires and haze, and provide recommendations to facilitate immediate response and effective mobilisation of resources within the region. The Panel of ASEAN Experts has been deployed three times during the critical periods of 2006.

II. Conclusions and Recommendations

The participants of the Regional Session "E" recommend authorities in all levels and international organizations:

South Asia:

1. To support countries to conduct national fire and fire management assessments, formulate legal frameworks and strategies, build sustainable fire management capabilities and institutions, develop fire management plans and human resources;
2. To give emphasis to improvement of participatory / community-based fire management approaches and institutional and technological capabilities at all levels;
3. To promote education and awareness-raising programmes on wildland fires;

4. To enhance cooperation among countries within the two regions and at inter-regional levels, aimed at sharing technology, expertise and data in fire management;
5. To encourage the endorsement and use of FAO's Fire Management Voluntary Guidelines;
6. To endorse the objectives of work of the UN-ISDR Wildland Fire Advisory Group / Global Wildland Fire Network and Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) and to support implementation of building fire management capability at both local and national levels, as well as through bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements;
7. To establish a regional South Asian Fire Monitoring Center, which in future may also serve as a regional coordination centre for wildfire disaster response;
8. To support the application of the non-legally binding instrument under the auspices of the United Nations Forum on Forest (UNFF) of 28 April 2007, and its implementation through the Multi-Year Programme of Work; as well as the International Strategy to Enhance International Cooperation in Fire Management, including the Fire Management Voluntary Guidelines in accordance with the recommendations by FAO-COFO / Ministerial Meeting 2005, and FAO-COFO 2007;
9. To create an enabling environment from all possible donors including national, international, bi-lateral, multi-lateral and private foundations for financial, technical and other resource support for sustainable fire management.

Southeast Asia / ASEAN Region:

1. To create enabling environment from all possible donors for financial, technical and other resources to support ASEAN in the implementation of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution;
2. To promote rehabilitation and sustainable use of peatlands and support the implementation the ASEAN Peatland Management Strategy (APMS); which comprehensively addresses not only the root causes of peatland fires and the associated transboundary haze pollution, but also other critical aspects including biodiversity conservation, socio-economic development, alternative livelihoods, and multi-stakeholder and multi-agency involvement using an ecosystem approach; at all levels;
3. To further intensify efforts in addressing the root causes of fire and haze problems including eradicating poverty and balancing short-term commercial interests with long-term sustainable development goals;
4. To further continue promoting multi-stakeholder participation and coordinated efforts at international, regional, national and local levels;
5. To further disseminate controlled burning practices and alternatives for shifting cultivation for the local community, as well as promote zero burning practices for commercial purposes;
6. To further intensify community-based fire management efforts such as development of community fire brigades; providing incentives and livelihood options for the local community to control open burning practices; and disseminating techniques on alternatives to using fires;
7. To continuously refine the regional SOP for monitoring, assessment and joint emergency response based on field experiences and through simulation exercises;
8. To develop strategies to mobilise and channel resources to support preventive and mitigation measures that are more long-term in nature, and explore innovative financing

options, including micro-credit financing, market-based instruments, and carbon-related financing.

9. To ensure building and financing of sustainable structures and institutions at all levels responsible for fire management and / or inter-agency / multi-stakeholder involvement in fire management.

The participants of the Regional Session “E” urge authorities and international organizations to provide the financial and technical assistance to the Global Wildland Fire Network, and in particular to the South Asia and Southeast Asia Regional Wildland Fire Networks represented in this session. International cooperation must be developed in the region to address the issues related to wildland fires in the regions. A strategy could be the development of ‘North-South’ and ‘South-South’ linkages for planning, programming and project implementation.

Most important efforts to put forward at present are to foster cooperation, including regular annual meetings of the regional networks and project implementation:

1. Countries of the South Asia region not yet participating in the regional network are to be encouraged to join the network to cooperate collectively in resolving national and transboundary issues related to fire;
2. It must be ensured that the outcomes of the previous meetings, conferences, consultations should be realized by the decision makers in national and international levels;
3. Financial support must be provided to the UNISDR Global Wildland Fire Network and its secretariat, the GFMC, both by national authorities and international organizations;
4. Member countries should also promote inter-regional cooperation, including joint investigations, joint fire management demonstration projects, consultations, and conferences;

Global issues impacting on the two regions were identified and discussed. They included:

- Demographic changes, including widespread poverty
- Land-use change and land management
- Climate change
- Air quality and human health
- Human security and peace

The South Asia and Southeast Asia Joint Regional Session recommends to the 4th International Wildland Fire Conference:

1. That a series of Regional Consultations – tentatively addressing “Global Change and Wildland Fire: Regional Solutions for Fire Management” – be held globally, within the next 1-2 years, to progress the global issues which are impacting on the geographic areas covered in this 4th International Wildland Fire Conference’s regional sessions.
2. That the 2nd International Wildland Fire Summit – tentatively addressing “Global Change and Wildland Fire: Fire Management Solutions for Mitigation and Adaptation” – be held within the next 2 to 4 years under the auspices of the UNISDR Wildland Fire Advisory

Group, aimed at developing a non-legally binding international accord on cooperation in wildland fire management.

In accord with the desire to see further action on global issues impacting on wildland fire within the geographic regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia, the Regional Session proposed that the South Asia and Southeast Asia collaborators shall hold a Regional Consultation in within the next two years.