



Forestry in the Field

Latin America and the Caribbean

Mexico: Fire Training Program

Introduction

In the Spring of 1998, Mexico experienced its worst fire season in history. Drought conditions, the start of the agriculture burning season and high winds fanned over 14,000 fires which eventually burned over two million acres throughout the country. A disaster declaration was issued by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico and the USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) went into action. In an unprecedented effort, USAID through OFDA and in cooperation with the Mexican government, provided over \$7.5 million in support of the fire suppression effort. Fire tools and equipment were purchased, aviation support acquired and technical assistance provided. Over 40 advisors from the U.S. Federal and State fire community, including the USDA Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and Texas Forest Service, assisted in the effort.

Following the fires in June, the Mexican Ministry of Environment (SEMARNAP) signed an MOU with USAID implementing a national fire prevention and restoration program. Funds were to be managed by the Mexican Conservation Fund to provide small grants to communities affected by the fires. As a complement to the USAID program, OFDA-Latin America, SEMARNAP, the USDA Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management developed a comprehensive training program to strengthen the capacity of SEMARNAP to manage multiple fire events and strengthen coordination across states as well as local level efforts in fire prevention and suppression.

Approach

The USAID/OFDA assessment team, initially sent to Mexico to determine US Government involvement, attributed a large part of the success of the

suppression efforts in Southern Mexico to regional fire training programs conducted over the years by SEMARNAP in cooperation with the Forest Service. These regional courses, given intermittently depending on funding, had been ongoing since the mid 1980's. In regions where training courses were conducted (Chiapas for instance) the fire organization structure was notably stronger than in those without training.

The new training program would build on the strengths of past efforts by ensuring funding for basic training courses, but would be more comprehensive in including training in fire management and mobilization, aviation support, communications, and most importantly, safety.

It would strive to develop a multi-agency coordination system in Mexico along with improving and promoting Mexico's capacity to provide training in fire management and suppression to its southern neighbors.

Results

Since 1998, coordinators have taught over 500 fire personnel through formal classroom trainings and demonstrations, technical exchanges, workshops, conferences and assessments. Results include:

- Basic development of a wildfire emergency management system is in place in Mexico. Training continues in 2001 in Oaxaca and Chiapas.

USAID Forestry Team
U.S. Agency for International Development
Ronald Reagan Building 
Room 3.08 
Washington, DC 20523-3800 

- Aviation support training continues including training of pilots, firefighters and ground-based personnel in using and managing helicopters for suppression efforts.
- A warehouse system for fire tools and equipment has been developed including inventory, distribution and control.
- Fire radio systems and repeaters are functioning, along with training in their installation, operation and maintenance.
- A wide variety of fire management training materials have been reviewed, adapted and translated into Spanish-including training materials for firefighters, pilots, fire equipment catalogs, radio communication needs and emergency fire management systems, and fire behavior manuals.
- Coordination continues through the North American Forest Commission, Fire Management Study Group to assist in identifying areas for mutual collaboration among the members – USA, Canada, Mexico. The Canadian Forest Service has provided funds for the program.
- Over 1000 volunteers have been trained by SEMARNAP in basic fire suppression working with local ejidos and rural communities located near protected areas. The more advanced regional training courses continue on an annual basis.

Outstanding Issues

There is lack of scientific information on fire behavior and fuel characteristics in Mexico, particularly in the southern tropical forests. Managers have little fire ecology information available to make informed decisions about fire and fire management. Mexico needs to invest in generating science information about fire and its role in the ecosystem.

Wildfire and fire management are an important issue when the fires are burning. With a return to more “normal” fire seasons, political support

for continued investment in fire management is difficult to generate.

Lessons Learned

National level capacity building takes time and persistence. Fire training in Mexico had been ongoing for many years-albeit at a low level. The past 3 years of increased investment has greatly advanced Mexico’s capacity to where Mexican crews may well be helping the U.S. or Canada fight its wildland fires in the future. The program’s success however, was dependent on a foundation that had been built over the past 15 years.

Enhancing “south-to-south” cooperation and assistance can be a viable and important objective for training programs.



Forest Service Staff and counterparts discuss strategy for combating wildfires in Southern Mexico. Photo by Tom Rios.

Additional Information

Heather Huppe
 USAID/Mexico
 Tel: +52-5-209-9100
 Email: hehuppe@usaid.gov

Catherine Karr
 USDA Forest Service
 Tel: (202)501-2602
 Email: ckarr@fs.fed.us

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