

OFFICE OF U.S. FOREIGN DISASTER ASSISTANCE (USAID/OFDA)

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USAID/OFDA Supports Community-Based Fire Prevention in Chile

Since August 2016, USAID/OFDA has supported a program to increase the capacity of vulnerable communities in Chile to prevent and respond to wildfires. The project entitled, “Community-Based Wildfire Prevention in Chile’s Wildland-Urban Interface,” aims to lessen the impact of wildfires on increasingly at risk urban communities in central Chile.

In central Chile, wildfires have always played an inescapable and important role in maintaining forest ecosystems. However, the rapid increase in the number of people who choose to live in and around forests and other natural areas, referred to as the wildland-urban interface, has contributed to a greater incidence and severity of forest fires in recent years. These fires have caused considerable economic, environmental, and social losses and are a threat to populations, forests, and forest biodiversity far beyond what has been seen in Chile’s recent history.

Historically, most interventions in Chile have emphasized fire suppression and emergency response. However, faced with the growing challenge of fires in the wildland-urban interface, the Government of Chile’s National Forest Corporation (CONAF)—the entity responsible for preventing and fighting wildfires in the country—is prioritizing wildfire prevention at a community level.



Representatives from Caritas Chile, the Chilean National Emergency Management Office (ONEMI), and the Municipality of Constitución attend the CONAF-hosted project meeting. *Photo Courtesy of Caritas Chile.*

With USAID/OFDA support, Catholic Relief Services and Caritas Chile have been working collaboratively with CONAF to implement a project in Chile’s wildfire-prone Araucanía, Maule, and Metropolitan regions to enable vulnerable communities in the wildland-urban interface to improve their wildfire prevention and response capacity.

The objectives of the program are to (1) develop and pilot an effective community-based training model for preventing wildfires in the wildland-urban interface and improve the capacity of government and civil society organizations to support the implementation and expansion of this model; (2) promote community organization, preparedness, and mitigation, and develop local and long-term mechanisms to enable communities to adapt to living with wildfire hazards rather than short-term suppression and response; and (3) create an e-learning course to facilitate dissemination of the community training and organization model among academic, civil society, and public sector actors.

“Through this project, our communities have strengthened their disaster preparedness and prevention capabilities. If a wildfire occurs, they now know how to react to help control it,” noted CONAF Maule Region Director Luis Carrasco.

In total, approximately 1,800 households have participated in the training through community workshops. During the workshops, community members learned how to reduce the risk of wildfires by clearing and maintaining land surrounding their homes, as well as wildland areas. Workshop activities included the distribution of hand tools to assist

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The community of Costa Blanca-Papirua, Chile, receives tools to facilitate pasture management and elimination of dry vegetation to reduce and mitigate the impact of forest fires in their communities. *Photo Courtesy of Caritas Chile*

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community members in clearing and maintaining these spaces, greatly reducing the risk of wildfires.

“In our region wildfires occur almost every summer. Through this project we have learned how to prevent wildfires and reduce their impact. Our community groups have visited the most vulnerable households to help them clear the brush and dry grass around their homes and create firebreaks. We learned that as an organized community, we can be a solution to natural disasters,” commented Costa Sur Community Emergency Committee Leader Rosario Ibarra.

Abelino Lizama from Manuel Nanculeo Community in Araucanía, who lost his home during the 2014 wildfires said, “Within 20 minutes the wildfires destroyed my house, taking away 15 years of effort. I had the opportunity to participate in a six-month training program where I learned to identify my risks and how to prevent fires. Now, I feel safer because I keep the land surrounding my house cleared and irrigated.”

USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor (RA) Phil Gelman commented, “Creating wildfire-adapted communities is a proactive process that builds community-wide capacity to reduce risks and respond effectively in the event of an emergency. To be successful, these efforts must involve the entire community—including residents, government agencies, emergency responders, businesses, and others. We were very pleased to see the community stakeholders take an active role in working together to reduce ignition sources, lessen fuel loads, modify structures, prepare the larger landscape for fire, and build strong local coordination and response capability.” In addition, RA Gelman noted that municipalities must contribute to creating a culture of prevention in their jurisdictions by developing prevention and emergency response plans, in addition to passing codes and ordinances as possible, for fire prevention.

For more than 20 years, USAID/OFDA has worked closely with local governments and communities throughout Latin America to help protect the region’s most vulnerable populations and strengthen local agencies’ responses to forest fires.



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Participants play educational games to learn about disaster risks in their communities. Photo courtesy of ADRA

USAID/OFDA Helps Strengthen DRR Culture in Earthquake-Affected Communities in Ecuador

In response to the devastating effects of the April 16, 2016, earthquake that impacted the west coast of Ecuador, USAID/OFDA partnered with Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) to help build a disaster risk reduction (DRR) culture in earthquake-affected urban areas of Atacames, Esmeralda, and Manabí provinces.

Through this project, entitled “Estamos Preparados” (We are Prepared), USAID/OFDA implementing partner ADRA is educating, preparing, and training communities, schools and public and private institutions to respond effectively to disasters in coordination with the Government of Ecuador Risk Management Secretariat (SGR).

The project is also helping strengthen the capacity of the SGR by developing DRR tools, establishing local risk reduction networks, forming community brigades, strengthening Emergency Operations Committees, creating emergency plans for municipalities, and developing a local DRR culture.

The program focuses on educating children and adolescents in DRR to expand DRR culture in impacted

communities. Through training workshops, children ages 8–17 years were taught how to make a difference by implementing DRR strategies in their homes and communities. Children were placed into emergency community committees and emergency brigades to foster a sense of community and discover that when they worked as a group, they had the power to strengthen their community’s capacity to prepare for and respond to disasters.

USAID/OFDA disaster risk management specialist Michael Camchong commented, “It is exciting to see the kids take ownership of reducing risk in their homes and communities. They understand that they have the power to make their surroundings safer.”



Children who took part in the program wave their USAID flags. Photo Courtesy of ADRA