

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

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

USAID/OFDA Responds to Unprecedented Wildland Fires in South America

Beginning in early August, unprecedented wildland fires in South America's equatorial zone affected more than 15 million acres of crops, forest, and grasslands, threatening the livelihoods of multiple communities in Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay.

In response to humanitarian assistance requests from the governments of Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay, between August 27 and September 29, USAID/OFDA deployed several teams of experts, who provided technical assistance to response authorities within these countries. USAID/OFDA also provided firefighting tools and personal protective equipment (PPE)—including shirts, pants, gloves, helmets, and goggles for nearly 4,000 firefighters in Bolivia and Paraguay—valued at \$1.9 million. In addition, USAID/OFDA locally purchased 3,000 work boots for Bolivian and Paraguayan responders, as well as other crucial response supplies, such as communication equipment and machete sets.

In response to a specific request from the Government of Brazil (GoBR), from September 1 to 25, USAID/OFDA deployed a team of four U.S. Forest Service (USFS) fire cause investigation experts and two fire management specialists to support efforts to contain massive wildfires in the Amazon Rainforest. The six-person USAID team of experts worked in partnership with GoBR Ministry of Environment (ICMBio) and the National Center for Wildfires Prevention and Control (Prevfogo) assessing wildland fires in the Amazon to learn more about its causes and recommend prevention measures.

Between August 27 and September 13, a 14-person team of USAID experts—comprising four USFS staff and 10 USAID/OFDA disaster and fire management experts—provided technical assistance to the Government of Bolivia (GoB) wildfires response. To better support the various response locations, the USAID team divided into three smaller specialized units. Two groups of experts deployed to the severely threatened municipalities of Roboré and San Ignacio to assess fire behavior and risks and help incident command posts (ICPs) enhance fire-suppression



USAID fire management experts conducted an aerial assessment over a large magnitude wildfire near Roboré municipality in Santa Cruz. Photo by Irene Gago, USAID/OFDA

operations and address coordination challenges between response agencies. A team of USAID experts remained in Santa Cruz de la Sierra city, providing technical support to the Santa Cruz Government Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to bolster logistics, planning, and coordination at a departmental and local level. In addition, a USFS aviation expert provided technical guidance to GoB Air Force officials on fire-ground-air operations coordination, tactics, and safety.

Santa Cruz Department EOC Planning Director Guillermo Saucedo said, “I want to thank the USAID team for all the technical support provided to help save the Chiquitania Region. Your support undoubtedly marked a seminal moment for the wildland fires response, particularly for the Departmental EOC’s management, planning, operations, logistics, and coordination.”

In Paraguay, an 11-person USAID team—comprising three USFS staff and nine USAID/OFDA disaster and fire management experts—provided fire management technical assistance to the Government of Paraguay (GoP) National Emergency Secretariat (SEN) and other local response actors to increase their response capacity to wildland fires in El Alto de Paraguay Department in El Chaco Region.

GoP authorities highlighted that the USAID team’s most significant contribution to the wildfires response was supporting the establishment of a unified ICP, which helped improve collaborative work and create a broader, unified firefighting strategy. In addition, the team helped build advanced fire suppression tactic capacities and supported daily operational incident plans.

National Commander for the National Board of Voluntary Fire Corps of Paraguay Rodolfo Baez expressed, “The team of USAID experts contributed

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To determine possible causes of wildland fires, Prevfogo and USAID experts assess burn patterns in Amazon Region. Photo by Forrest Behm, USFS

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a lot to the response. They helped us create a unified command center for the entire operation. Before they arrived in El Chaco, we had the equipment, the staff, and the ideas, but we didn't know how to work together collaboratively.”

“The USAID experts provided technical guidance on best tactics to control a large, complex fire that was threatening indigenous communities and livelihoods in El Chaco. They also provided training sessions on extreme fire suppression tactics, increasing the firefighters’ understanding and comfort with indirect attack methods like firebreaks and backfires,” noted ICP SEN Commander Santiago Vasquez.

To help identify values-at-risk, prioritize areas for fire-suppression operations, and determine best response tactics, the USAID teams conducted multiple aerial assessments over most affected areas in Bolivia and Paraguay and facilitated access to remote predictive and modeling services to analyze and forecast fire behavior and growth.

In Paraguay, the USAID team also supported the integration of a geographic information system (GIS) expert from USAID implementing partner World Wildlife Fund (WWF) into the ICP in El Chaco and facilitated access to wireless communication, which was essential to obtaining updated satellite images of hot spots and fire advances, as well as to visualize and evaluate the effectiveness of firebreak and burnout operations. In addition, the GIS specialist provided updated meteorological data, including temperature, humidity, and wind conditions.

“The WWF GIS expert, along with the USAID/OFDA communications officer, facilitated access to satellite images and wireless communication that we did not have available at the ICP. One day, they both advised of satellite images showing fires close to a group of firefighters, just in time to evacuate them. They helped save eight lives,” said SEN Commander Vasquez.



USAID/OFDA donated firefighting tools and PPEs for nearly 2,000 Bolivian and Paraguayan responders, as well as 3,000 locally-procured boots and other crucial supplies. *Photo by Irene Gago, USAID/OFDA*

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USAID/OFDA and USFS team members provided technical assistance to local first responders at Chovoreca ICP, which was crucial for helping save nearly 2.4 million acres of forests and pastureland in El Chaco. *Photo by Irene Gago, USAID/OFDA*

USAID/OFDA Receives a Special Recognition for Supporting Paraguay's Wildland Fires Response

On October 17, El Chaco Integrado, a sustainable development project of the Association of Municipalities of El Chaco, Paraguay, granted USAID/OFDA a special recognition for the extraordinary support to the country during wildland fires response, which helped save thousands of lives and nearly 2.4 million acres of pasturelands and forest in the unique ecosystem of El Chaco Region.

The GoP, as well as civil society and private sector stakeholders from El Chaco also expressed their gratitude for the USAID/OFDA team's support to the GoP wildfires response.

With USAID/OFDA's technical assistance, Paraguayan responders were able to control the spread of the most critical wildfire in Alto de Paraguay Department, by implementing advanced indirect attack fire-suppression tactics, including constructing more than 40 kilometers of mechanized fire lines and burnouts along the border with Bolivia. In addition, the team advised GoP responders on aerial firefighting tactics to control smaller fires throughout the area.

“We provided technical guidance and training on extreme fire suppression tactics to a group

of nearly 70 first responders in El Chaco, including voluntary firefighters and private ranch staff. We explained to them why these extreme wildland fires should be controlled through indirect attack methods, as it is not safe to place personnel and resources near the fast and high-intensity flames. The objective of constructing a fire line with bulldozers and setting a burnout is to remove flammable material such as trees and shrubs to slow the fire's progress and prevent spreading,” said USAID/OFDA Integrated Fire Management (IFM) Specialist Luisa Alfaro, who was part of the team that provided crucial technical assistance to the GoP wildfires response.



USAID/OFDA IFM specialist Luisa Alfaro provided guidance on daily incident action plans to ICP commanders in El Chaco. *Photo by Irene Gago, USAID/OFDA*