

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

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



USAID/OFDA supported the Eighth National Forest Firefighter Mobilization Exercise that took place in Colombia last October, gathering more than 350 firefighters and instructors. *Photo by Luisa Alfaro, USAID/OFDA*

USAID/OFDA Enhances Integrated Fire Management in Latin America

The wildfire season of 2016-2017 was characterized by unprecedented destruction in several countries of Latin America. Drought, high temperatures, and increased wind speeds during the region's dry season, which typically extends from December to April, favor the spread of large and complex forest fires. These fires extend into populated areas and result in deaths, severe health impacts, and the loss of housing, infrastructure, and livelihoods.



Since the 1990s, USAID/OFDA DRMS Luisa Alfaro (left) has provided fire management technical assistance to Latin American countries. *Photo courtesy of Luisa Alfaro, USAID/OFDA*

In response, USAID/OFDA has increased technical assistance in the region to support enhanced integrated fire management capabilities.

In Chile, following the most devastating wildfires in the country's history in early 2017, USAID/OFDA worked closely with the government and disaster management entities to strengthen national integrated fire management programs and policies. With support from USAID/OFDA, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) deployed a team of firefighting experts to advise Chilean authorities on effective response options and help reinforce air operations management in January–February. In addition, USAID/OFDA provided technical support to Chile's emergency response agencies to promote the incorporation of the Incident Command System (ICS) into the national wildfire management strategy.

According to Luisa Alfaro, a USAID/OFDA Integrated Fire Management Specialist with more than 20 years of experience guiding emergency response agencies throughout the

Continues on page 2

USAID/OFDA Launches First Latin American Emergency Management Systems Forum

The complexity and magnitude of disasters in Latin America during the past decade have highlighted the need to develop and strengthen national emergency management systems (EMS) and reinforce response preparedness plans and programs at national, regional, and local levels. In order to promote the exchange of disaster management knowledge and best practices among a variety of emergency management stakeholders, USAID/OFDA hosted the First Latin American EMS Forum in Panama City, Panama, from August 29–30.

USAID/OFDA organized the program as part of a new technical assistance program that provides specialized advisory and training activities to Latin American and Caribbean countries for the development of inter-sectoral and inter-institutional agreements under a common EMS. The agreements facilitate coordination among agencies by unifying criteria, establishing common objectives, and articulating the components of emergency management.

During the forum, approximately 50 participants—representing emergency response organizations from 15 Latin American countries, including national emergency management office

Continues on page 2



The First Latin American EMS Forum gathered nearly 50 representatives from national emergency management offices. *Photo by Marco Marin, USAID/OFDA*

Emergency Management Systems Forum, continued from page 1

directors and disaster management experts—gave lectures and participated in a series of daily discussion panels on themes related to the consolidation of EMSs and response preparedness mechanisms and strategies in the region.

Panel discussions included topics such as logistics and response plans for humanitarian assistance during hurricane season; legal frameworks to reinforce risk management processes in urban contexts; mechanisms to prevent displaced populations from returning to landslide-prone areas; capacity building for Damage Assessment and Needs Analysis (DANA) information management systems; reinforcement of Emergency Operations Center (EOC) management and coordination systems; use of Geographic Information Systems to assess post-disaster damage and needs; organization and consolidation of urban search-and-rescue (USAR) groups; flood early warning systems; and enhancing emergency management at the local level.

During the event, USAID/OFDA Disaster Risk Management Specialist (DRMS) Sergio David Gutiérrez, who coordinates the Regional Disaster Assistance Program's EMS technical assistance component, explained, "The purpose of this forum is to enable the exchange of emergency management best practices, highlighting the strategies and actions that can help improve the timeliness, efficiency, and quality of disaster responses." DRMS Gutiérrez emphasized the importance of strengthening disaster response preparedness at all levels; but most importantly at the community or municipal level, noting, "In the region's most recent disasters, once again community members proved to be the first to respond, saving many lives."

Forum participants agreed on leading priorities for the improvement of disaster response preparedness and coordination throughout the region, including enhancing of emergency management information systems, strengthening decision-making processes, increasing coordination with technical-scientific entities, and creating a DANA database system that could be shared among countries.



Forum participants reviewed the region's top priorities for the improvement of disaster response coordination. Photo by Marco Marin, USAID/OFDA

Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance
Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean



Tel: +(506) 2290-4133
Email: ofdalac@ofda.gov
Internet: www.usaid.gov

Integrated Fire Management Enhancement, continued from page 1

region, "One of our most important achievements in Chile this year was teaching responders to speak the same language and work under a common emergency management system for fighting wildfires. Furthermore, I would like to highlight the excellent work done by the National Forestry Corporation (CONAF), the National Emergency Management Office (ONEMI), the National Fire System and the private sector to identify corrective measures and develop the National Strategy for Strengthening Forest Fire Management."

In Colombia, USAID/OFDA supported Colombia's National Fire Department (DNBC) and the volunteer fire departments of La Cumbre, Palmira, and Yumbo municipalities to organize the Eighth National Forest Firefighter Mobilization Exercise in October. Approximately 350 firefighters from 21 brigades of 13 Colombian departments took part in the event, which featured 16 national and international speakers from Brazil, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Panama, and the United States. The exercise promoted understanding of the ICS, reviewed forest fire management concepts, and strengthened coordination between different institutions involved in wildfire management.

In 2017, USAID/OFDA also provided specialized assistance to El Salvador's National Forest Fire Commission (CNIF) to develop the country's 2017-2021 Fire Management Strategy. Additionally, USAID/OFDA collaborated with local authorities in Guatemala's Quiché Department to enhance the region's fire response plan for wildland-urban interface areas—communities on the border between urban development and unoccupied rural land characterized by increased fire risk. Through this effort, USAID/OFDA helped local emergency response agencies develop effective action plans to minimize the threat of wildland-urban interface fires to lives and property.

For more than 20 years, USAID/OFDA has worked closely with Latin American countries providing specialized technical to strengthen comprehensive fire management, protect the region's populations, and enhance communities' preparedness and response capacities. Since the 1990s, USAID/OFDA has trained more than 20,000 forest firefighters and multiple teams of trainers throughout the Latin American and Caribbean region.



The Eighth National Forest Firefighter Mobilization Exercise in Colombia featured 16 national and international speakers from Brazil, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Panama, and the United States. Photo by Luisa Alfaro, USAID/OFDA