

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

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

USAID/OFDA Helps Respond to Largest Wildfires in Chile's History

In January, Chile faced the most devastating wildfires in its history, fueled by strong winds and a record heat wave, with temperatures as high as 111 degrees Fahrenheit. As of February 4, the fires had burned more than 1.4 million acres of forest in south-central Chile; killed 11 people, including seven first responders who died on duty; and destroyed at least 1,640 homes.

The Government of Chile (GoC) mobilized 42 aircraft and more than 20,000 first responders, including firefighters, armed forces members, National Forestry Corporation (CONAF) brigades, and community authorities, to support efforts to contain and extinguish the fires.

On January 21, in response to the gravity of the situation, the GoC declared a state of emergency and disaster for Biobío and Maule regions and O'Higgins Region's Cardenal Caro and Colchagua provinces, and requested international assistance. USAID/OFDA responded immediately, providing an initial \$100,000 to local non-governmental organization (NGO) Caritas Chile for the procurement and delivery of firefighting equipment to Chilean firefighters.

Through the Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP), USAID/OFDA provided an additional \$20,000 for the local procurement of fire prevention tools for affected communities, and \$20,000 to the Adventist Development Relief Agency (ADRA) to provide emergency relief items, including hygiene and sanitation kits, to displaced residents.



USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Sarah McNiece, left, and Disaster Risk Management Specialist Luisa Alfaro oversee delivery of the 1,000 personal protective equipment kits to CONAF and firefighters. Photo courtesy of Sarah McNiece, USAID/OFDA

To help firefighters better combat the blazes, USAID/OFDA also provided, with assistance from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), 1,000 personal protective equipment kits, valued at approximately \$200,000, to CONAF and Chilean firefighters. Each kit contained two high-visibility fire-resistant shirts, two pairs of fire-resistant pants, fire-resistant gloves, helmet, and protective goggles. USAID/OFDA Regional Advisor Sarah McNiece, who oversaw delivery of the equipment, explained, "As the need for additional firefighters to combat the wildfires grew, this equipment became critical to ensure firefighters' safety, given the dangerous conditions inherent in their work."

From early January to early February, USAID/OFDA funded technical support from the USFS, which deployed a four-person team of firefighting experts to assess conditions and advise Chilean authorities on effective response options.

Additionally, USAID/OFDA activated a seven-person team of disaster experts, including a senior regional advisor (SRA), a regional advisor, and a disaster risk management specialist (DRMS) with more than 25 years of experience in forest fire management and the incident command system, a globally recognized best practice for emergency response. The team also included a Chile-based DRMS and five local surge capacity consultants who began providing

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On January 27, wildfires destroyed more than 1,000 homes and displaced at least 5,000 residents in the town of Santa Olga, in central Chile's Maule region. Photo courtesy of Jorge Cáceres

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support to the GoC National Emergency Management Office (ONEMI) in mid-January.

“These are by far the most damaging fires Chile has ever experienced,” commented Luisa Alfaro, RDAP’s fire management specialist. “It has stretched to the limit Chile’s capacity to respond. The country is dealing with many fires at the same time, and the moment firefighters manage to extinguish some, new fires appear. In some cases, extinguished fires have started again.”

Despite these challenges, Chile’s response managers rose to the occasion, according to USFS Team Lead Tom Frey.

“Given the enormity and unprecedented scope and complexity of the current fire situation faced by the GoC, our entire technical team was very impressed with the efforts of the Chileans involved in this disaster, from CONAF and firefighter managers at the national level, to CONAF’s regional firefighters and the volunteer firefighters in the communities,” Frey commented.

USAID/OFDA SRA Tim Callaghan, who visited several of the hardest hit areas, noted “It was impressive to see that GoC evacuate large communities, often at night, and under very difficult circumstances.”



USAID/OFDA partner ADRA Chile delivered 600 hygiene kits, 600 sanitation kits, and other essential relief items to impacted residents in Chile’s Maule region. *Photo courtesy of ADRA Chile*

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USAID/OFDA staff and USFS team members conducted field assessments and met with local first responders to discuss the challenges they faced and observe firefighting operations. *Photo by Luisa Alfaro, USAID/OFDA*

With USAID/OFDA Support, U.S. Forest Service Provides Technical Assistance to Chile

The Disaster Assistance Support Program (DASP) was created in 1985 to link technical experts from USFS to USAID/OFDA’s disaster management operations. DASP provides technical support for disaster response, management, planning, operations, and disaster risk reduction, including through the USFS-developed Incident Command System (ICS), a command and management system to organize emergency response. DASP also provides training and briefings to several hundred staff from USAID/OFDA and other USG offices and partners each year and supports USAID/OFDA’s emergency response capacity by mobilizing a roster of up to 250 disaster management experts from the USFS and other domestic agencies to respond to disasters.

received briefings at the regional offices of CONAF and ONEMI, as well as local firehouses. The team also received briefings regarding air operations at the Panguilemo Airport near Maule’s capital city of Talca and from Incident Command staff at the Las Máquinas Incident Command Post in San Javier city, Maule.

During a February 6 meeting with CONAF and USAID/OFDA staff, the USFS team presented observations and recommendations to CONAF National Director Aaron Cavieres, who thanked the USFS for their timely assessment and welcomed further collaboration between CONAF, USAID/OFDA, and USFS.

In response to the January wildfires in Chile, DASP, with support from USAID/OFDA, deployed a four-person emergency team of technical experts to assess the situation and advise Chilean authorities on the response. The team met with counterparts from the GoC, CONAF, and ONEMI, and conducted field assessments in the acutely affected regions of Biobío, Maule, and Valparaíso, where they observed operations and



USAID/OFDA and USFS staff meet to discuss the response effort. *Photo by Liliam Magaña, USAID/OFDA*