

USAID'S BUREAU FOR HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE (USAID/BHA)

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



The GoB deployed nearly 1,500 military personnel and firefighters to support fire suppression efforts across the country. *Photo courtesy of Santa Cruz Department Government*

USAID/BHA Responds to Bolivia Wildland Fires

Seasonal wildfires that began in July have spread across eastern Bolivia due to prolonged drought and high-temperature conditions.

The Government of Bolivia (GoB) reported that as of October 12, the fires had burned nearly 3.9 million acres of grasslands and protected forest areas, resulted in five deaths, and affected at least 126,000 people. The departments of Beni and Santa Cruz have been particularly impacted, with 38 and 58 percent of the total land charred, respectively.

According to Douglas Morton, Chief of the Biospheric Sciences Laboratory at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Goddard Space Flight Center, "In the 2000s, severe droughts linked to the warm phase of the Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation created conditions where forest fires could burn for months, even in dense Amazon rainforest," explaining further that "this year fits that pattern. As warmer Atlantic sea surface temperatures shifted rainfall to the north, central South America has suffered drought conditions that have put multiple areas at greater risk of wildfires."

The effect of the wildfires in Bolivia has been devastating for indigenous communities whose livelihoods have been severely affected and natural protected areas that lost thousands of acres of forests and biodiversity. Fires have collectively destroyed more than 111,000 acres of crops, 66,000 acres of grazing land, and 800 head of livestock.

The situation escalated to such a magnitude that on September 15, GoB

Interim President Jeanine Áñez issued a national disaster declaration to allocate economic resources and mobilize additional emergency personnel to respond to the wildfires nationwide. Subsequently, on October 2, Santa Cruz Department Governor Rubén Costas Aguilera issued an emergency declaration for the department.

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Unprecedented wildland fires in 2019 and 2020 have affected millions of acres of crops, forest, and grasslands in Bolivia, threatening ecosystems and the livelihoods of multiple communities. *Photo courtesy of Santa Cruz Department Government*



More than 360,000 participants from across Costa Rica took part in the CNE organized virtual evacuation drill. *Photo courtesy of CNE*

USAID/BHA Supports Virtual Evacuation Drill

USAID/BHA provided funds to Costa Rica’s National Commission for Risk Prevention and Disaster Response (CNE) to support a virtual earthquake evacuation drill in Costa Rica on October 13, 2020.

More than 360,000 people from all seven of Costa Rica’s provinces participated in the CNE evacuation drill, including staff from the Costa Rican Institute of Aqueducts and Sewers and the National Insurance Institute. CNE also activated its ICS virtually, with support from first response staff, doctors, and first aid staff.

This drill exercise aims to prepare the population for an earthquake’s potential occurrence amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The drill also aims to help CNE collect valuable georeferenced data—such as the number of occupants per house or office building during COVID-19 lockdown measures—and determine which areas had lower participation in the drill. Collected information will allow CNE to develop training strategies and identify areas where preparedness efforts need to be reinforced.

In addition to the drill, Costa Ricans had access to an online education tool (simulacro.cr) where they learned how to prepare for an earthquake emergency and evacuate safely in compliance with the Government of Costa Rica Ministry of Health COVID-19 prevention measures.

“USAID/BHA applauds the Government of Costa Rica and CNE for their continued efforts to better prepare the Costa Rican population for disasters,” commented USAID/BHA senior regional advisor Tim Callaghan. “We look forward to continued collaboration with them in the future.”

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On October 7, U.S. Chargé d’Affaires Charisse Phillips declared a disaster due to the effects of the wildfires in Bolivia. In response to a humanitarian assistance request from the GoB, USAID/BHA provided \$100,000 to local non-governmental organization Fundación Amigos de la Naturaleza (FAN) for the local procurement of communication and firefighting equipment—including satellite phones, personal protective equipment (PPE), hand tools, backpack pumps, motor pumps, chainsaws, and first aid kits—to support Santa Cruz Department in their efforts to contain the wildfires.

In addition, USAID/BHA, through the Regional Disaster Assistance Program, provided an additional \$40,000 to FAN for the procurement of fuel and equipment to support the GoB response to the wildfires and activated two integrated fire management specialists to provide virtual planning and operational technical support to the Santa Cruz Departmental Emergency Operations Center (COED).

In addition, USAID/BHA activated a senior program officer and a Colombia-based sub-regional manager to liaise with government officials and coordinate USG response efforts in Bolivia. A team of USAID/BHA Disaster Assistance Support Program and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) fire management specialists are also supporting Santa Cruz COED staff with fire modeling simulations, which help predict how the fire will spread. These simulations can help response personnel prioritize and coordinate the assignment of aircraft, heavy equipment, and other resources on the ground.

GoB authorities highlighted that the USFS fire simulation models provided them with a clearer view of the potential spread of wildfires, prioritizing areas for fire-suppression operations and determining best response tactics.

USAID/BHA also supported a USFS program that launched earlier this year to provide technical assistance to bolster Bolivia’s efforts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to wildland fires. The program supports the capacity building of national and local emergency management agencies, fire brigades, and community first responders to safely and effectively respond to wildland fires and other disasters. The program includes instruction on initial attack utilizing the incident command system; wildland fire management, prevention, and investigation; predictive services technical assistance; and prescribed fires. In addition, the program will provide technical exchange and study tour opportunities in the U.S. for Bolivian first response personnel.



In 2019, USAID/BHA donated firefighting tools and PPEs for nearly 2,000 firefighters in Bolivia. *Photo courtesy of Santa Cruz Department Government*