

The Pakistan Journal of Forestry

Home and Foreign News

Serious World increase in Forest Fires reported. Rome, May 8—Forest fires have increased at a serious rate in both developing and developed regions of the world in recent years, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported today.

In the developing countries, population increases coupled with a shortage of arable land have accelerated an age-old practice where indigent farmers set fire to forests to make way for cultivable plots and pastures. This has resulted in a sharp decrease of the forest cover and the extension of grasslands which are far more susceptible to fire.

In some developed countries, particularly in the Mediterranean area, forest fires have increased because of the influx into forest areas of residents of the countries and tourists. The possibility of fire is increased by the very nature of the forests, mostly pines and woody scrubs, which are easily ignited, and by the climatic conditions with dessicating winds from the north (mistrals and tramontanas) or from the south (siroccos). The spark which gives birth to fires is most often the result of negligence or, unfortunately, in too many cases is intentional.

In 1973, according to an FAO report, there were in eight countries bordering the Mediterranean "between 20,000 and 25,000 fires and approximately 200,000 to 250,000 hectares were burned over". In 1970, in Spain and the south of France alone, fires blackened 160,000 hectares, and 21 human lives were lost.

This was also the most destructive year in history for forest fires in the Mediterranean-like climate of California. More than 600,000 acres (240,000 ha) were blackened, 722 homes destroyed, and 16 lives were lost within a few weeks in autumn.

It is generally agreed that fire in the Mediterranean is rarely the result of natural causes such as lightning. Fire is almost always the result of negligence of passers-by who throw away cigarette-ends or who light fires for such purposes as cooking. Brush

fires are also frequently started when brushwood is burned off in the countryside as along ditches. In addition, there are in certain regions of interest to tourists, more and more fires deliberately started. The aim is temporarily to lower the value of an area of land by depriving it of its main interest in order to be able to use it for buildings or facilities which would not otherwise be permitted.

The deterioration of the human environment due to forest fires has prompted FAO and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to launch plans for a programme to come to grips with the problem. The initial planning work is being financed by UNEP and carried out by FAO. Aims would include:

- Identifying areas where forests are more susceptible to fire.
- Elaborating a methodology for the assessment of fire dangers, using meteorological observations in combination with the characteristics of the vegetation and topographic conditions.
- Encouraging countries to develop and improve fire detection systems and to strengthen fire fighting organizations and techniques.
- Promoting regional cooperation on forest fire control by improving the exchange of information on techniques and equipment, encouraging research and mutual aid.

The programme of work for this project was reviewed by a team of forest fire experts and foresters in Rome last week.

The FAO/UNEP Expert Consultation on Detection and Control of Forest Fires for the Protection of Human Environment reviewed a programme prepared by Mr. Carl Wilson, a U.S. forest fire expert. The programme selected three regions (Mediterranean, African Savannah, Pine forest in Central America) where problems are considered urgent and where regional cooperation can be achieved because of similarity of conditions.

Eighth World Forestry Congress to be held in Indonesia in 1978. Rome, June 16—Indonesia has been selected by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as the site of the 8th World Forestry Congress in 1978.

The FAO Council, currently meeting here, accepted Indonesia's offer to be host to the Congress in Jakarta, tentatively the first part of September, 1978. Indonesia, which has some 122 million hectares under forest, is the world's principal exporter of hardwood logs and one of the most important forestry countries in the developing world.

The last four World Forestry Congresses were in Buenos Aires (1972), Madrid (1966), Seattle (1960) and Dehra Dun, India (1954).