



**Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)
Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, San José, Costa Rica**

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS



Photo courtesy of the Costa Rica Firefighters Corps

The meeting aims to strengthen the capabilities of Central American firefighter corps to improve disaster response throughout the region.

Central American Firefighters Meet to Strengthen Capabilities

With USAID/OFDA support, the Costa Rica Firefighters Corps is hosting the Central American Firefighters Congress on April 13-15. The meeting is expected to gather Central American Confederation of Firefighter Corps (CCBICA) representatives to harmonize the professional profile of firefighters in Central America.

Participants, who include directors of firefighter corps and academies in the region, will share their best practices to improve the region's preparedness to disasters. The national firefighter organizations will join forces to design a training curriculum to professionalize firefighters' service and meet Central America's firefighting prevention and response needs. Participants will also develop more stringent requirements for becoming a firefighter, including defining the skills, academic backgrounds, and experiences necessary for successful firefighting.

According to Maria Luisa Alfaro, USAID/OFDA Forest Fire and Incident Command Systems Specialist, "the firefighter of the future needs to be prepared to face the new risks that climate change will present in our rural and urban communities. Its important for firefighter academies in the region to develop a certification system that qualifies firefighters for different types of emergencies. The requirements to become a firefighter must be more rigorous because fighting fires nowadays is becoming more complex. It involves continuous state-of-the-art training and a deep commitment to have the mental fortitude and physical stamina to meet the demands of the job."

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DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Paraguay Releases DRR Strategic Plan

With USAID/OFDA support, Paraguay's National Emergency Secretariat (SEN) recently released its first Strategic Institutional Plan to guide disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities.

The plan, which covers the 2015-2018 period, aims to strengthen the institutionalization and implementation of disaster risk management in Paraguay. While presenting the plan on March 9, SEN Minister Joaquín Roa noted that the document represents SEN's aspirations to build a resilient Paraguay and exemplifies the paradigm change his administration has envisioned, in which SEN is both proactive and reactive to emergency preparedness and response.

USAID/Paraguay Director Fernando Cossich, USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor (SRA) Timothy Callaghan, Regional Advisor (RA) Sidney Velado, and Disaster Risk Management Specialist (DRMS) Carlos Córdova attended the plan presentation ceremony in Asunción.

"The Government of Paraguay now has a strategic way of looking at DRR, which they are communicating to citizens, sharing with donors, and using to implement programs. USAID/OFDA applauds SEN for taking the lead with this strategic vision, which will guide Paraguay's DRR focus and priorities," SRA Callaghan said. He added that the plan is written in a way that makes it easy for the general public – families, community members, mayors and other local leaders – to understand.

In October 2014, USAID/OFDA and SEN signed a

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Photo by Teresa Torres, USAID/Paraguay

USAID/OFDA Senior Regional Advisor Tim Callaghan (center) joins Paraguayan authorities to release the new DRR strategic plan.

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Luis Salas, Chief of Costa Rica Firefighters Corps and CCBI-CA Board of Directors Member, commented “with the support of USAID/OFDA, for the first time the CCBICA will have a manual that defines the essential knowledge and skills required to serve as a firefighter in the region. The coalition is also developing a study to analyze which standards and strategies fire departments of the region should follow to meet the needs of the population it serves, which is approximately 47 million people.”

Fernando Calderón, USAID/OFDA DRMS who is working with Manuel Ramírez, USAID/OFDA DRMS and School Safety Consultant to provide technical assistance for this process said, “it is important to harmonize the capabilities of fire departments in Central America in order to respond to the most common emergency situations in our region—floods, earthquakes, and structural and forest fires—with the same practices and service standards.”

USAID/OFDA has provided training and technical assistance to Central American firefighters since 1983. According to Tim Callaghan, USAID/OFDA SRA, “Central American fire service organizations are strategic partners for USAID/OFDA’s mission, because together with the national emergency systems and the Red Cross, these entities are often the first to respond to major emergencies and disasters in the region.”



Photo by Krystal Hartman, USAID/OFDA

The congress this month will gather directors from all Central American firefighter academies to review training requirements.

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memorandum of understanding (MoU) to strengthen disaster risk management cooperation. The MoU builds on nearly two decades of disaster management collaboration between USAID/OFDA and the Government of Paraguay and outlines areas for capacity building such as DRR in education, incident command systems, fire management, damage assessment and needs analysis, hazardous materials incident prevention and response, basic life support and pre-hospital care, and urban search and rescue.

As part of this cooperation, USAID/OFDA provided technical assistance to SEN to produce the strategic plan. USAID/OFDA also funded the production of 500 copies of the plan to distribute to departmental and municipal governments, emergency response agencies, and private sector partners.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

New Staff Join USAID/OFDA/LAC

Three new staff members have joined the USAID/OFDA Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) regional team in San José, Costa Rica, since the beginning of the year.

USAID/OFDA RA Sarah McNiece has replaced RA Julie Leonard, who retired from the LAC team late last year, and will be in charge of monitoring disaster response and risk reduction programs in South America. RA McNiece previously worked for USAID/Food for Peace coordinating DRR programs in Ethiopia.

Program Officer (PO) Peter Schecter has taken on the role previously held by Kate Reid. PO Schecter has worked with USAID since 2010, first as a program and monitoring and evaluation specialist, and later with USAID/OFDA as a disaster operations specialist in Washington, D.C.

Auriana Koutnik has returned to San José to lead the USAID/OFDA/LAC Information Officer (IO) team. IO Koutnik previously assisted with regional information management under USAID/OFDA’s Regional Disaster Assistance Program.

To support USAID/OFDA humanitarian efforts around the globe, three staff members from the LAC regional office are serving on humanitarian assistance teams in Ethiopia, Turkey, and Iraq.

Haiti-based USAID/OFDA Senior Program Officer Jonathon Anderson will soon return from Ethiopia, where he helped the USAID/OFDA team provide humanitarian assistance in response to the drought. RA Sidney Velado left LAC last month to assist the Middle East Humanitarian Crisis Response team in Turkey. This month, RA Phil Gelman will take over as the Early Warning System Advisor for the team working on the Mosul Dam situation.