

Addressing fire management in the Philippines

According to a recent ITTO-commissioned report, DENR should re-assume responsibility for forest fire suppression

A LAW that removed responsibility for forest fire from the Philippines' Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has reduced the effectiveness of fire management in the country, according to an ITTO-commissioned report.

Written by a team of forest fire experts from the NSW Rural Fire Service (Australia) in close cooperation with DENR, the report reviews forest fire management in the Philippines and makes recommendations for improvement.

The review was undertaken under Decision 6 (XXXIII) of the International Tropical Timber Council, which makes the services of forest fire experts available to member countries to assist them in evaluating the country's forest fire prevention and management situation, identifying strategies and actions and developing project proposals.

Following a briefing and planning meeting at the DENR head office in Manila, the review team visited various sites in the Cordillera Autonomous Region and several other provinces in the northern Philippines' region of Luzon, and in Bukidnon Province in Mindanao.

Meetings were held with a wide variety of groups and individuals including:

- head-office staff of DENR, including the Undersecretary for Field Operations;
- indigenous people and officers from the National Commission for Indigenous People;
- people's organisations and non-governmental organisations;
- upland farmers, barangay captains and tribal elders;
- mayors, provincial governors, provincial board members and local government units;
- DENR Forest Management Bureau staff at the regional, provincial and community levels;
- DENR Training Academy staff;
- staff from the DENR/ITTO community forestry project (PD 221/97 REV.2 (F)) and from another community forestry project in Quirino Province;
- representatives of the Provincial Disaster Coordinating Council and the National Disaster Coordinating Council;
- staff from the Bureau of Meteorology in Manila;
- Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) staff at both headquarters and in the regions; and
- miners, farmers, agroforestry farmers and holders of Integrated Forestry Management Agreements.

Following the field visits, a series of consultations were held with DENR and BFP officers in Manila prior to a presentation to the DENR Undersecretary.

The team noted that: "unwanted forest and grassland fires go unchecked (in the Philippines) and destroy forests, grasslands, plantations, agricultural areas and other assets". This has many severe consequences, including:

- increased rural poverty through a decrease in forest cover, loss of soil fertility and increased erosion;

- the loss of biodiversity, especially in mossy forests and dipterocarp forests;
- impaired water quality and quantity in watersheds, especially due to erosion and siltation;
- reduced commitment to community-based forest management by communities due to the loss of forests by fire;
- damage to agroforestry and agriculture, including financial losses; and
- threats to life and property.

The report identified four main constraints to improving forest fire management in the country:

- the limited organisational capability within DENR, the BFP and other government agencies, non-governmental organisations, peoples' organisations and the community at large to manage and prevent forest and grassland fires;
- the limited operational preparedness at all levels, with the possible exception of a few plantation enterprises;
- inadequate fire prevention capability at all levels, with the possible exception of a few plantation enterprises; and
- the often poor management of 'controlled' burning.

According to the review team, at the heart of these constraints is the fact that DENR's Forestry Management Bureau is unable to allocate sufficient resources to forest fire suppression. As a result of a change in law, in which responsibility for forest fires was assigned to the BFP within the Department of Industry and Local Government (DILG), DENR (which retains responsibility for forest protection) has reduced its emphasis on forest fire management and its professional capabilities in fire management have declined.

The review team suggested that rectifying this organisational arrangement was a precondition for effective progress in forest fire management in the Philippines. It proposed a short-term solution that would require DENR and the BFP (through the DILG) to agree that DENR should be the lead agency for forest fire suppression. Such an agreement could be added to the Memorandum of Agreement that currently exists between the two departments. The team also made a number of practical recommendations for addressing the main problems that were identified and established priorities for their implementation in view of the limited resources available. In the longer term, the team recommended a five-year plan over which the recommendations might be implemented as well as some suggestions for possible intervention projects.

For more information contact: Dr Eva Muller, Assistant Director of Reforestation and Forest Management (rjm@itto.or.jp). The full report, A review of forest fire management in the Philippines, by Duncan Sutherland, Bruce Arthur, Rosalio Goze and Sabado Batcagan, can be downloaded (in English) at www.itto.or.jp/live/PageDisplayHandler?pageId=45