

POUNDS OF PREVENTION

- A Disaster Risk Reduction Story -

“Pounds of Prevention” is a series of short articles that illustrate how disaster risk reduction works and why it is important. Take a behind-the-scenes look at aid work in action, long before the disaster occurs. How is that possible? Read on!

FOCUS: PARAGUAY

Wildfires are common occurrences in Paraguay where hot, dry conditions coexist with the practice of using fire to clear wooded areas for agriculture. When large wildfires break out and spread, they can pose great risks to human life, infrastructure, and the environment, especially in national parks, ecological reserves, and wetland areas.



USAID has helped train Paraguayan firefighters since 2001. In recent years USAID has supported exercises for firefighters across the country to share experiences, learn the latest techniques, and improve coordination mechanisms. Photo courtesy of Paraguay's Volunteer Firefighter Corps.

In September 2007, more than 5,000 brush fires blazed across Paraguay, displacing tens of thousands of families, killing several thousand head of cattle, and destroying significant expanses of grazing land, crops, forests, and protected areas. At the time, Paraguay relied on a nationwide network of volunteer firefighters that was unable to combat an emergency of such magnitude.

USAID began providing technical assistance and training to Paraguay in 2001 to develop the country's disaster management practices. When the 2007 fires broke out, USAID expanded its assistance to support the government's response coordination efforts, providing guidance on how best to combat the destructive fires.

The Government of Paraguay subsequently used lessons learned from this experience to reexamine and improve its strategic approach to wildfire prevention, control, and response. USAID worked alongside Paraguayan counterparts, providing technical assistance to help the government transform the legal and policy framework for wildfire management. USAID helped the Paraguayan government and national emergency agencies identify and address weaknesses in the existing system and facilitated coordination among different government ministries, the private sector, and academia. The end result of these efforts was the comprehensive National Plan for Integrated Fire Management, which is now in effect.

At the tactical level, USAID supported the professionalization of volunteer firefighter brigades through enhanced management training and instruction on wildfire prevention and control. USAID provided essential communications and protective gear, as well as necessary tools such as water pumps, fire hoses, shovels, rakes, chainsaws, and axes. USAID also supported Paraguay's efforts to educate its public about the risks of starting wildfires.

The hard work of the Paraguayan government, its partners, and USAID paid off when wildfires broke out in the San Rafael Mountains Preserve in January 2012. Paraguay launched an efficient and prompt response and effectively employed the talents of volunteer firefighters who had been trained to assist with the early detection and management of wildfires. Local community members trained through risk management courses and prevention campaigns also contributed to early detection and likely reduced the scope and severity of the damage. These investments are certain to continue benefiting the country as Paraguay strengthens implementation of its national plan, which will simultaneously save lives and livelihoods while protecting the country's natural heritage from wildfires.



Firefighters combat a blaze in the San Rafael Reserve in January 2012. Photo courtesy of the Association for the Protection of the San Rafael Cordillera.