

Managing Fire to Protect Forests and Livelihoods: Creating and Validating Fire Management Plans in the Republic of the Congo

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Congo's Protected Area Agency Executive Director Paco Bockandza addresses a crowd of community members and government and civil society officials during a workshop to validate the first fire management plan in the country.

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An uncontrolled fire burns in the distance in the Plateaux Region of the Republic of the Congo.

Photos courtesy of Eva McNamara,
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“Fire is an incredibly important part of our way of life,” says Paco Bockandza, Executive Director of the Republic of the Congo’s National Protected Areas Agency. “People have been using fire to hunt and farm for many years. Unfortunately, it can also be dangerous, and right now it is destroying our forests and unique wildlife.”

The Batéké Plateau, a savannah forest mosaic in Central Africa, has one of the highest rates of lightning strikes in the world. Frequent storms, coupled with traditional land management practices that often utilize fire as a tool with insufficient controls, means that fires can grow out of control, damaging homes, farms, and protected areas. However, if wielded carefully, fire can be used to maintain pastureland, hunt, and regenerate farmland without becoming a threat to forests, plantations, and villages.

The U.S. Forest Service International Programs, supported by USAID’s Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment, is working with community representatives, protected area managers, and government officials in the Republic of the Congo to develop fire management plans. Beginning in 2014, a joint initiative was established with the Wildlife Conservation Society, the University of Edinburgh, and the University of Marien Ngouabi in Brazzaville to study the impacts of fires and collect important data about how large-scale fire management can help to reduce carbon emissions and conserve forests and protected areas.

Building upon this field work, and in an effort to promote sustainable fire use, the U.S. Forest Service, in partnership with nine national government agencies, four international and local non-governmental organizations, local prefectures, mayors, women’s groups, and community members, established a steering committee to develop a protected area fire management plan in collaboration with communities in and around the Léfini Reserve in the south-central part of the country. The committee solicited local and national stakeholders to express their needs concerning fire management in this area, as fire use is an important part of local land management practices but can also become a threat to protected areas. The resulting protected area fire management plan was validated by the committee and adopted at a ceremony in July 2018 attended by the Minister of Forest Economy Rosalie Matondo and the U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of the Congo Todd Haskell.

“Making and validating a fire management plan like this has never been done before,” says Executive Director Bockandza. “It was very important for us to begin this work by reaching out to rural and indigenous communities who depend on fire for their livelihoods. Without their involvement and approval, these fire management plans can be made, but they will never actually be implemented.”

The government is now looking to replicate this process elsewhere in the country, with the goal of creating a national fire management plan to be integrated into national forest policy guidelines. The U.S. Forest Service will continue to support the development of national fire management policy that reflects the need to preserve forests and land but also supports and protects local livelihoods.

USAID’s Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment has worked since 1995 to help protect and preserve forests and biodiversity within the region. Helping governments set up practical and viable fire management plans is an important step in preserving protected areas as well as sustainably managing landscapes and farmland. As an implementing partner, the U.S. Forest Service is committed to working in the region to support comprehensive and community-led fire management planning.

