



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

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Brigades Focus on Combating Forest Fires

Through the Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP) implemented by the International Resources Group, USAID/OFDA works with firefighter brigades throughout Latin America to improve national capacities to mitigate and control forest fires.

Since 2007, USAID/OFDA has been promoting forest firefighter brigade mobilization exercises as a way for different brigades to come together to measure capabilities and exchange best practices and experiences. According to María Luisa Alfaro, USAID/OFDA disaster management specialist in charge of the forest fire management component of the RDAP program, firefighters also learn to work as a single unit, in order to respond to a large-scale forest fire or to provide assistance to neighboring countries.

The first mobilization exercise took place in Cuenca, Ecuador, in September 2007, with the participation of 156 forest firefighters from different institutions. Costa Rica and Colombia soon followed suit with their own national exercises.

The most recent exercise took place in Guanacaste, Costa Rica, from January 9-11, 2009. More than 230 firefighters from Costa Rica participated in the Second National Forest Firefighter Mobilization Exercise. USAID/OFDA provided technical and financial assistance for the event, and sponsored observers from Guatemala and Paraguay.

Other mobilization exercises supported by USAID/OFDA include activities planned in Paraguay from April 3-5, Colombia from September 11-13, Ecuador from September 25-27, and Costa Rica in January 2010.



Photo courtesy of the Costa Rican National Firefighters Corps

Firefighters participate in Costa Rica's mobilization exercise to combat forest fires.

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Photo courtesy of the La Virginia Disaster Prevention and Response Committee

Funding from the Paul C. Bell Program will help Colombia's Technological University of Pereira study risks in various municipalities in Risaralda Department, including La Virginia, shown at left, which remained flooded for two months in 2008.

Paul Bell Program Grants Awarded

Six universities in Central and South America have been provided USAID/OFDA funding for disaster risk management projects as part of the third phase of the Paul C. Bell, Jr. Disaster Risk Management Program. The program provides small grants to institutions of higher education for projects involving practical efforts to improve disaster risk management in communities.

The Bell Program is a joint endeavor between the Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University (FIU) and USAID/OFDA, in recognition of the life and extraordinary contributions of Paul C. Bell, Jr. to disaster management.

Bell was an expert in risk management who dedicated his life to humanitarian work. In the mid-1980s, Bell helped establish the USAID/OFDA Latin America and Caribbean regional office in San Jose, Costa Rica, and served as the senior regional advisor until he passed away in 2003.

The Bell Program recently awarded a total of \$75,000 in grants, ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000, to universities in Costa Rica, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru.

The University of Costa Rica's

School of Geology will receive \$5,000 to provide five rural communities located in Alajuela, Cartago, and San Jose provinces with practical geological information to improve knowledge of natural and man-made risk factors. Additionally, the project will improve community knowledge about water resource management.

In Colombia, the Technological University of Pereira will receive \$20,000 to strengthen the Specialization in Disaster Prevention and Response Administration graduate program.

Specifically, the Pereira project will develop a Departmental Thematic Risk Committee comprising 10 specialists and carry out 10 graduate student projects detailing risk scenarios in municipalities in Risaralda Department that include possible interventions in local risk management. The university will also organize seminars and risk management workshops with the participation of municipal councils, municipal government agencies, civil society, academics, and non-governmental organizations. Additionally, the project will develop three lines of work that coordinate the investigations and

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Bell Program Small Grants Awarded

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social projections in the following areas: raising environmental risk awareness, incorporating risk management into territorial development planning, and improving communication and education in risk management.

The University of El Salvador's Eastern Multi-Disciplinary School, located on the San Miguel campus, will receive \$5,000 to train educators and students in the various careers in management of volcanic risk. Specific objectives include implementing community education through training workshops and field trips, forming an emergency response committee, creating a response plan, and developing local vulnerability maps. The project will also provide information about historical activity of Chaparrastique Volcano and resulting risk to the university community, and hold a volcano hazard simulation exercise to test community preparedness and emergency and evacuation plans.

In Guatemala, the University of San Carlos' School of Architecture will receive \$20,000 to enhance graduate courses in risk management at the level of "communities of practice," and to create and apply academically-based research and risk-prevention strategies to improve the sustainability and collective use of natural resources in Alta Verapaz, where pilot programs are currently being implemented.

In Peru, San Pablo Catholic University's Professional School of Industrial Engineering will receive \$5,000 to help create a center for research, discussion, learning, and generation of projects for the reduction, prevention, and management of risks in the Arequipa region.

Additionally, Peru's National University for Education's Committee for Education in Risk Management will receive \$20,000 for risk management efforts in the university and Lurigancho-Chosica community in Lima Province. The project aims to promote lasting risk consciousness among university administrators, staff, faculty members, and students, as well as among community members, to generate a wide-reaching culture of risk prevention.

COMING UP

INSARAG Americas Committee Meeting

USAID/OFDA is sponsoring the upcoming meeting of the Advisory Committee of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG), Regional Group for the Americas, scheduled for February 12-13 in Panama. The Advisory Committee will review the INSARAG Americas annual work plan and assign tasks to committee members.

DIPECHO Action Plan Meeting

USAID/OFDA senior regional advisor Tim Callaghan and regional advisor Sidney Velado will participate in the upcoming regional consultative meeting for the launching of the Disaster Preparedness Programme of the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Department (DIPECHO) VII Action Plan for Caribbean community-based disaster preparedness. The meeting will be held in the Dominican Republic from February 18-20.

Shelters and Settlements Workshop

USAID/OFDA is hosting a Shelter and Settlements Workshop for the LAC region on February 25 and 26 in San Jose, Costa Rica. Costa Rica-based USAID/OFDA regional advisor Phil Gelman is organizing the workshop, which will be led by USAID/OFDA Shelter, Settlements, and Mitigation specialist Chuck Setchell, from Washington, D.C.

Other USAID/OFDA regional advisors and disaster management specialists will attend, along with representatives from nearly a dozen non-governmental organizations. Participants will review shelter essentials, materials, global trends, and developing a settlements strategy that links to reconstruction and development efforts.

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The Caribbean Prepares for Disasters

The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA) is moving forward on a USAID/OFDA-funded project to raise awareness and help prepare communities for tsunamis and other coastal hazards in the region.

Multiple stakeholders, including international agencies and Caribbean organizations, are actively participating in preparedness efforts, according to USAID/OFDA regional advisor Sidney Velado, the technical specialist overseeing implementation of the USAID/OFDA grant. Velado attended the recent meeting of the Joint Project Coordination Committee for the Earthquake Readiness Capacity Building Project, the Enhancing the Effectiveness of Information and Communications Technology Applications and Tools for Disaster Management in the Caribbean Region Project, and the USAID/OFDA-supported Tsunami and Other Coastal Hazards Warning System (TCHWS) Project.

At the meeting, held on January 27 in Bridgetown, Barbados, TCHWS project directors presented committee members with a progress report, an updated project implementation timeline, a revised performance monitoring framework, and a communications strategy.

Risk Reduction through Education

On January 21 and 22, approximately 50 representatives from Central American ministries of education met in Panama with representatives from USAID/OFDA and other regional and international organizations involved in disaster risk reduction efforts, to strengthen alliances in the area of education for emergencies.

USAID/OFDA disaster management specialist Manuel Ramírez, who attended the meeting, said participants successfully defined actions that can be taken to support the Central American Integration System's Educational and Cultural Coordinator (CECC/SICA) 2009-2011 Regional Agenda for Education.



Photo courtesy of Manuel Ramírez, USAID/OFDA

USAID/OFDA disaster management specialist Manuel Ramírez (center) participates in the education meeting.

MOU Signed with Sao Paulo, Brazil

USAID/OFDA has signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Civil Defense officials in the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil, to collaborate on disaster risk reduction activities of mutual interest, including training and technical assistance.

USAID/OFDA senior regional advisor Tim Callaghan and Civil Defense coordinator Luiz Massao Kita signed the MOU in Sao Paulo on February 3.

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