

The Weekly

Information Resource Bulletin

FOCUS: Bushfires

Bushfire smoke is a mixture of water vapor, small particles and gases, which may include carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides. All of these are greenhouse gases that are harmful to the environment and contribute to global warming.

Bushfires are destroying thousands of hectares of vegetation every year. Over 400 million acres of land worldwide are left bare annually due to bushfires.

Sometimes, bushfires are caused by nature – triggered by such things as lightning strikes; however, evidence shows that worldwide, only 26 percent of bushfires are from natural causes, while 74 percent are as a result of human activity.

In Malawi, bushfires mainly occur during the dry season and most are caused by charcoal makers, mice hunters and people who clear their land by burning grass, brush and other waste.

The goals of the Weekly Bulletin are:

- To help journalists discuss with their listeners the effects of bushfires
- To help journalists engage their communities in the search for solutions to bushfires
- To help journalists discuss with their listeners how bushfires contribute to climate change.

The Problem: Bushfires

There are many aspects to the impact of bushfires. They damage or destroy valuable infrastructure, cause widespread damage to forests and occasionally even the death of trees.

Bushfires also cause mass destruction of wildlife and have a severe adverse impact on surface water supplies, as well as injecting huge amounts of smoke into the atmosphere.

Bushfires release huge amounts of smoke and ash which, apart from creating pollution also cause weather changes in the area where the bushfire has taken place.

Heat pushes up the air, creating clouds which, if met by air of a different temperature, can result in storms.

The air pollution can also lead to asthma and cause other health problems.

When a forest burns as a result of a bushfire, carbon and other greenhouse gases are emitted into the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is the primary greenhouse gas emitted by bushfires.

Malawi has had several bushfires that have destroyed vegetation and wildlife.

For example, in 2012 a fierce and uncontrollable bushfire, that was deliberately set, destroyed about 70 hectares of trees at Vipha plantation in Mzimba, burning timber and machines.

In 2005, Malawi lost more than 600 hectares of forests to bush fires that had been raging for a month in the Mulanje Mountains.

Activities for Journalists

Use your community radio station to help listeners understand how bushfires caused by human activities are dangerous to people and the environment.

You can do this by discussing the examples of bushfires mentioned above which have occurred in Malawi.

In 2012 a fierce and uncontrollable bushfire destroyed about 70 hectares of trees at Viphya plantation in Mzimba, burning timber and machines. (You used this same material in the first page, no need to repeat it.)

We described the 2012 fire at Viphya plantation – and it had another fire in 2011 that started in September of that year and peaked about one month later. Sixty-five percent of the young trees in the forest were affected and severely damaged.

Most of the deliberate burning and the uncontrolled fires occur at the end of the dry season, just before the onset of the summer rains. These fires are destructive even to fire tolerant trees (USAID-conservation of tropical forests and biological diversity; 2005)

Remind listeners that anyone found causing bushfires can be prosecuted, since every

district in Malawi has by-laws which stipulate that anyone found starting bush fires is liable to prosecution.

Do a vox pop with people from your area and ask them why some people cause bushfires and also ask about the dangers of these bushfires.

Talk to one of the traditional leaders from your area and ask him/her about the measures he/she has put in place to make sure that people do not cause bushfires.

Interview a local environmentalist on the dangers of bushfires.

How does the government handle those who start bushfires? Are the laws strict enough? Are the laws enforced? What needs to be done at the local, regional and national level to reduce man-made bushfires?

Community Engagement

Urge listeners to send SMS, call or stop by the radio station to talk about the dangers of bushfires and what human activities that cause bushfires can be avoided.

Useful Contacts

- Director of Environment in the Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Environment; +2651772428
- The Director, Wildlife and Environmental Society of Malawi ; +2651843502
- Archibald S, Roy DP, van Wilgen BW, Scholes RJ. 2009. What limits fire? An examination of drivers of burnt area in Southern Africa. Global Change Biology 15: 613–630.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

PRB

INFORM
EMPOWER
ADVANCE



INFORMING
DECISIONMAKERS
TO ACT



DEVELOPING RADIO PARTNERS