

Collective Action for Halting and Avoiding Fires in the Pantanal

An open letter to local, regional and national governments of the trans-boundary Pantanal, and the international development, water, environment and biodiversity communities

29 October 2019

Dear Distinguished Recipients, Excellencies, Ministers, Ambassadors, Heads of National, Regional and International Decision-making Bodies and Agencies, Leaders of International Climate, Wetlands and Biodiversity Conventions, Heads of Leading International and Inter-governmental Organisations,

On the occasion of our 2019 annual meeting in the Pantanal, it is with concern and determination that we, the Wetlands International's leadership team, wish to present this open letter, **Collective Action for Halting and Avoiding Fires in the Pantanal**.

The Pantanal is one of the largest transboundary continental wetlands in the world, covering more than 150,000 km². Part of the Paraná - Paraguay Wetlands System, the Pantanal is recognised by the Ramsar Convention as an internationally important wetland and by UNESCO as a World Natural Heritage Site and Biosphere Reserve. Its unique hydrology, ecology, biodiversity and culture support more than 1 million people and livelihoods, 2,625 species, provide food and water security and store untold amounts of carbon. It is the backbone of regional resilience in the face of climate emergency.

Increasing intensity and severity of fire is threatening life in the Pantanal

This year, in 2019, there has been a three-fold increase in the numbers of fires across Pantanal – both legal and illegal. Of these fires, an unprecedented number could not be controlled, threatening priority conservation areas, ecological resilience, negatively impacting the health and safety of local Pantanal communities and neighbouring cities, and disrupting the regional economy.

Factors leading to increased intensity and severity of fires in the Pantanal

A combination of factors including the reduction of monitoring in the region, a late reaction from a reduced-capacity fire brigade and a lack of rapid emergency action from the Government to mobilise state forces to control the fires have contributed to the intensity and severity of the situation in the Pantanal. More specifically, these factors include:

- The Brazilian Institute For Environment and Renewable Resources (IBAMA) which controls and oversees environmental issues has had its federal investments budget reduced 34 per cent.¹
- Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (INPE), the Brazilian geospatial environmental monitoring agency, experienced a 67 per cent budget cut in comparison to last year, reducing its capacity to monitor fires and fire sources. In addition the federal government

¹ Office of the Comptroller General – CGU Brazil

<http://portaltransparencia.gov.br/orgaos/20701-instituto-brasileiro-do-meio-ambiente-e-dos-recursos-naturais-renovaveis>

blocked 38 per cent of INPE budget for forest monitoring in the Amazon and borders of the Pantanal, including the real-time identification of fires. Currently there is no specific budget nor programme by INPE to monitor the Pantanal, increasing its vulnerability.²

- Official data from INPE and IBAMA regarding environmental losses and risks of fires (including alerts) has been discredited by the federal government, which at the same time, has introduced a development policy to increase areas for agriculture and cattle raising.³
- According to the Secretary of Environment, Production, Economic Development and Family Agriculture of Mato Grosso do Sul State (SEMAGRO), Jaime Verruck, more than 90 per cent of the fires were attributable to human causes⁴. SOS Pantanal and WWF Brazil, which also confirmed this figure, have emphasised the illegal nature of the fires, since during the period July to September, the use of fire to manage land was prohibited.

Collective action is needed for pro-active fire prevention

Urgent action is required to bring the fires under control and mitigate these threats. The planning and measures to prevent next year's drought reaching the same proportions must start immediately. Alongside strengthening fire brigade and supporting organization capacity, environmental education must be included in official government planning.

Wetlands International calls for:

- The development of policies and sanctions to discourage the further lighting of illegal fires
- The coordination of national early warning systems from countries bordering the transboundary Pantanal, and inclusion of geo-spatial data to monitor and evaluate ecosystem impact
- The provision of technical assistance to protected areas and landowners to support emergency response measures
- The support of local and regional organisations and fire prevention agencies to exchange learning, build capacity, develop logistical skills, enhance equipment and strengthen personnel
- The empowerment of civil society organisations, local communities, indigenous groups and other stakeholders to identify fire sources and use traditional knowledge to counter environmental degradation and natural fires
- The development of dialogue between civil society, local communities, landowners and all levels of government to support the development of joint management plans and adoption of long-term environmental restoration and fire prevention models

It is only with a united effort from all levels of government, civil society, non-governmental and private organisations, that the problem of fire can be minimised and the balance of life of this globally important region be guaranteed.

With this open letter, we urge our wider network, the international communities working in development, water, climate and biodiversity, and all stakeholders to collectively work to increase the ambition, investment and action in pursuit of this goal.

² Office of the Comptroller General – CGU Brazil and media

<https://www.folhape.com.br/economia/economia/brasil/2019/09/06/NWS,115644,10,1103,ECONOMIA,2373-GOVERNO-TRAVA-ORCAMENTO-MONITORAMENTO-MATAS-INPE.aspx>

³ <https://sustentabilidade.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,alertas-do-inpe-indicam-alta-de-40-em-desmate-na-amazonia-governo-contesta,70002950037> and <https://sustentabilidade.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,bolsonaro-acusa-inpe-de-divulgar-dados-mentirosos-sobre-desmatamento,70002929326>

⁴ <https://www.campograndenews.com.br/meio-ambiente/com-estado-de-emergencia-ms-quer-avioes-no-combate-a-incendios>

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