

# Belize Wildfires

## SITUATION REPORT #1

9.00 PM AST on MAY 28, 2024

### Wildfires in Belize cause significant damage to agricultural crops and threaten homes in several villages

#### Summary

##### Key Information:

- Over two hundred (200) families affected.
- Over ten thousand (10) hectares of agricultural land have been destroyed by wildfires in Belize.
- This has impacted approximately 200 homes and caused over eight million US dollars in damage.
- Currently, the full extent of the impact on agriculture (crops and livestock) remains unassessed due to the continuous wildfires and prevailing dry weather conditions.
- There is a need for continuous monitoring, and recovery support to Belize.
- Level 2 response support is being provided through the Regional Response Mechanism (RRM).



#### Overview

According to the National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO), in the past few weeks the Cayo and Toledo Districts, have been experiencing severe wildfire due to human activity, lightning strikes, and extremely hot and dry weather conditions. Officials also reported that the country has been experiencing a period of no rainfall, resulting in low and dried up rivers, creeks, ponds, wells and swamps. The wildfires destroyed more than 10 thousand hectares of agricultural land in the Toledo District of Belize, particularly in the villages of San Pedro Columbia, Crique Jute, and Na Luum Ca. The fires which peaked during the period May 16-19 threatened several homes. An initial damage assessment conducted by the NEMO estimated over eight million US dollars in losses and that more than two hundred families have been affected so far. On May 24, as part of the initial assessments, Prime Minister John Briceno, Minister for NEMO Andre Perez, Toledo West Area Representative Oscar Requena, Minister for Agriculture Jose Mai, and National Disaster Coordinator Captain Daniel Mendez, participated in an aerial reconnaissance flight over the affected areas in Toledo and the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve in the Cayo District.



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### **The National Emergency Management Office reported during the Caribbean Development Partners Group Meeting on May 28, 2024:**

- The NEMO Toledo Office was activated on May 16th, and initial assessments commenced on May 17th.
- Soldiers from Fairweather Camp, were deployed to the area of San Pedro Columbia to assist in firefighting efforts with assistance from members of the community.
- One search and rescue operation was conducted, and one Emergency Shelter was opened in Crique Jute village to house four (4) families who were at risk.
- Efforts have been focused on fire suppression and containment of the blazes, not only in the San Pedro Columbia area but in other villages across the district.
- The initial damage assessments revealed that approximately 200 families have been impacted and damages have been reported to be approximated US\$8 million dollars.
- NEMO presented a preliminary assessment of the damages to Cabinet on Tuesday, May 28. They received positive feedback for support and are now awaiting a final report.

#### **AREAS OF CONCERN :**

- NEMO reported that Astrum helicopters were used to drop 32 thousand gallons of water to support the response teams on the ground but has raised concern that the wildfires continue to threaten the San Antonia (Cayo) water system.
- Although NEMO has responded to fires in Blue Creek and Silver Creek villages, pockets of fire continue to threaten the communities of Toledo. The agency is preparing assistance for several families who have asked for humanitarian assistance including protective equipment.
- The fire risk remains high in the Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve and many other parts of Belize, as such, NEMO continues to monitor and respond where and when requested.
- The Caribbean Institute of Meteorology and Hydrology (CIMH) expressed concern about the location of the fires on the 'down' slopeside of the mountains (based on review of the satellite imagery) in addition to the prevailing dry weather conditions that favor proliferation of the wildfires, and made the strong recommendation for the national meteorological services to monitor the wind shifts for the safety of fire officers in the area.



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### VILLAGES / SECTORS IMPACTED

#### ***Cayo District***

This district experienced large wildfires in the Mountain Pine Ridge Reserve. This area contains several thousand hectares of coniferous pine forest. Within this region an estimated 12,564 hectares of coniferous forest has been lost to the wildfire. The Forest Department indicated that the fires may have been caused by a lightning storm. Extremely hot and dry weather conditions and the readily susceptible pine forest led to the wildfire which quickly spread out of control.

Currently the full extent of the impact on agriculture (crops and livestock) remains unassessed due to the continuous spread of the wildfires and prevailing dry weather conditions.

#### ***Toledo District***

In this area, the genesis of the wildfire, is claimed to be caused by traditional agricultural practices. The eastern and western portions of this district have been affected by the wildfire. The area affected consists of broadleaf forest, agriculture areas and residential communities. A total of nineteen communities and large portions of broadleaf forest were directly affected, and other areas indirectly affected. The communities of San Pedro, Colombia, San Antonio, Santa Cruz, and Crique Jute areas on the western portions and Medina Bank, Golden Stream, and Indian Creek communities on the eastern portions have been severely affected. Agriculture (crops and livestock) in this district has been, and remains severely affected by this wildfire. Prevailing dry weather conditions continue and sporadic fires remain.

#### ***Infrastructure/ Transportation Update***

The Ministry of Infrastructure Development and Housing continues to monitor and maintain the airstrips, bridges, roadways, culverts and other infrastructures unaffected by the wildfire. Some assistance with heavy machinery has been deployed to the Cayo District to assist with fighting the wildfire in the Mountain Pine Ridge.

#### ***Housing and Public Building Updates***

##### **Schools**

Schools in the Toledo District were affected by the smoke from the wildfire, which led to temporary closure of several schools due to the poor air quality. Schools in the Cayo district remain open.

##### **Government Buildings**

All government buildings remain unaffected.

##### **Residents Homes**

The residential areas within the Toledo district were affected by both the wildfire and the prevailing dry weather conditions; to this end, all water sources are low. A total of four residential homes have been burnt in the fire.



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### REVIEW OF SECTORS CONTINUED

#### **ENVIRONMENT UPDATE**

The wildfires have destroyed approximately 32,000 acres of primary and secondary forested areas in major watershed areas of the Mountain Pine Ridge and Colombia forest reserves. These fires continue to burn out of control due to their remote location, the extremely dry and hot conditions and lack of resources to engage directly to extinguish the flames.

#### **ACTIONS TAKEN BY NEMO**

- NEMO chartered the ASTRUM helicopter services to assist with firefighting efforts.
- NEMO and the Ministry of Infrastructure Development and Housing (MIDH) collaborated and deployed heavy equipment to clear fire lines to contain the fires in the Mountain Pine Ridge area and San Antonio.
- NEMO requested assistance from the Belize Defence Force, MIDH and community volunteers to assist in the firefighting efforts.
- NEMO requested assistance from Non-Governmental and private organizations to assist in the fire-fighting efforts in both districts.
- NEMO has established and maintains daily communication with the CDEMA Coordinating Unit to facilitate surge support through the Regional Response Mechanism (RRM) for combating the wildfires as required.

#### **IMMEDIATE NEEDS AND PRIORITY ACTIONS IDENTIFIED**

- Burnt Areas Emergency Response Team (BAER Team)
- Continued satellite Imagery for the wildfire impact area
- Technical Advisory services on wildfire response
- Support for farmers in the Southern District



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### REVIEW OF SECTORS

#### ***Agriculture Updates***

The Ministry of Agriculture continues to assess and monitor activities in this sector. However, preliminary assessments from the air and on the ground indicate that there have been extensive damage and loss to crops and livestock and the overall activities of farmers in the affected areas.

#### ***Utility Updates***

Smart Telephone: Operations in this sector continue uninterrupted.

Digicel: Operations in this sector continue uninterrupted.

Fortis Belize Limited Power Company (FBL): Operations in this sector continue uninterrupted however, due to the wildfire that affected areas in the proximity of the power generating dams, there is the likelihood that the wildfires will lead to second and third order effects in the near future and during the upcoming rainy season.

Belize Water Services Limited (BWSL): During the reporting period, BWSL continued their maintenance and servicing schedule.

#### ***Food and Ration Updates***

At present, residents in the Cayo district are meeting their food and ration demand however in the Toledo district it is anticipated that there will be food and ration concerns in the next few days as corn, beans, pumpkin, vegetables, fruits and other crops were destroyed.

#### ***Water Distribution Updates***

Water tanks, for both the firefighting efforts and for agricultural consumption were provided to the villages of San Antonio (Toledo), San Pedro Colombia, Crique Jute, Santa Cruz, Blue Creek, Jordan, Corazon Creek, Dolores, Jalacte, Santa Elena, and Hicatee.

Within the Cayo District the villages of Armenia and portions of Bullet Tree are receiving water distributions.

#### ***Health Updates***

There were reports of cases of respiratory issues related to smoke inhalation and poor air quality. The hospital and health centers are in possession of adequate supplies of drugs/medication to deal with the health and wellbeing of the residents across the region.

#### ***Business and Commerce Updates***

Operations in this sector continue uninterrupted.



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### **CARIBBEAN DISASTER EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY (CDEMA) ACTIONS:**

- CDEMA has undertaken the following actions in support of Belize:
  - Established and maintained communication with NEMO in Belize.
  - Discussed the emerging needs and made recommendations for enhancement of the response operations.
  - Facilitated access to surge support through the RRM.
  - Facilitated access to satellite imagery through the Copernicus charter and provided technical support through the GIS team to visualize the needs of NEMO.
  - Facilitated discussions with the European Union Emergency Response Coordination Centre (EU ERCC) to provide technical support with firefighting and managing the wildfires.
  - Engaged the Caribbean Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) for guidance on available region support to fight wildfires.
  - Convened a meeting of the Caribbean Development Partners Group (CDPG) on Tuesday, May 28, facilitated information sharing among the CDPG partners, and consolidated the reports of the efforts of the partners in support of Belize.
- CDEMA continues to facilitate discussions with ECHO and other regional and international agencies to provide technical support to Belize.
- CDEMA has initiated discussions with Belize on a recovery project for restoration of livelihoods in the agricultural and wildlife sectors through the Caribbean Early Recovery Fund (CERF) under the Global Affairs Canada (GAC), Targeted Support to CDEMA Programme.
- CDEMA will continue to monitor the situation with NEMO Belize and provide updates as necessary.



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### **CPDG PARTNER CONTRIBUTIONS:**

#### **Belize Red Cross (BRC)/IFRC Country Cluster Delegation:**

- The BRC has launched a Disaster Emergency Relief Operation and will provide protective gear for firefighters, primarily, leather boots, goggles, masks and gloves.
- The BRC will also deploy two teams of six first aiders to NEMO to support the efforts in impacted communities.
- As part of the scope of the operation, the BRC will provide cash and voucher assistance to families affected and simultaneously assess the specific needs of the impacted population.
- The BRC will support NEMO through the provision of volunteers to assist in undertaking Damage Assessment and Needs Analysis (DANA) across the impacted villages.

#### **Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)/ U.S. Agency for International Development (US AID)**

- The agency has deployed an Advisor and Disaster Risk Management Specialist to Belize to provide technical assistance.
- The BHA will provide Fire Suppression tools and other firefighting items for NEMO as part of a US\$15,000 grant.

#### **ECHO**

- The agency will continue to monitor the situation and provide technical assistance as requested.

#### **MAP ACTION**

- The agency will continue to monitor and provide technical support as requested.

#### **PAHO**

- The agency stands ready to assist with the provision of humanitarian assistance but has requested the quantifiable amount of first aid supplies needed.