

U.S. - Moroccan Partnership Leads to Improved Fire Management

Fouad Assali is one of Morocco's preeminent wildfire management specialists. He fields calls and requests from all levels of government and international partners at all hours of the day and night with grace, humility, good humor, and an incredible sense of diplomacy. When the U.S. Forest Service International Programs approached the Moroccan High Commission on Water, Forests and Combating Desertification to initiate a technical cooperation program on wildfire management in 2012, Assali and his team were obvious partners for the endeavor.

"U.S. Forest Service experts have contributed significantly to making us love the profession of being fully engaged as a forest fire protector. Regarding specifically the fight against forest fires, we affirm that Incident Command System (ICS) is an exemplary mode of organization to face disasters," said Assali.

The U.S.-Moroccan partnership exemplifies U.S. Forest Service technical assistance abroad. Both the Moroccan High Commission and the U.S. Forest Service recognized the increasing severity of forest fires in Mediterranean-type ecosystems and committed to a shared vision for approaching the problem. The program uses a simple model for engagement that follows three main guidelines: 1. a clear, step-by-step list of objectives, 2. engagement and involvement of qualified human resources and monitoring of achievements, and 3. support from leadership to mobilize human resources and funding as needed. A major success of this approach was the development of the National Center for Forest Climate Risk Management in Rabat, which the High Commission established in 2016 to improve coordination and management of forest fire response and climate risk in Morocco. U.S. Forest Service experts worked with the High Commission staff to implement institutional structure, standard operation procedures, and fire operations guides for the center.

"Climate change will have proven impacts on the occurrence and severity of forest fires. Future challenges will be great and we strongly hope that this program of cooperation and exchange of experience remains viable and continues to exist. One of the strong links that enabled the success of this program is the partnership between the work teams: respect, confidence, and the definition of things as they are (strengths, weaknesses, etc)," said Assali.

Missoula, Montana based U.S. Forest Service specialists share Assali's enthusiasm for the partnership and a desire to continue the relationship.

"Working with the High Commission is easy because all the folks involved are so engaged, accommodating and friendly. The ability to exchange information back and forth is very meaningful and fluent, despite the language barriers and differences in culture," said U.S. Forest Service specialist Erin Noonan-Wright.

“Our Moroccan counterparts have shown a level of professionalism, enthusiasm and passion for adopting the ICS system and partnering with the U.S. Forest Service, that few other countries have matched. I am very excited to watch this partnership continue to grow, and look forward to teaching to, and learning from our Moroccan counterparts in the future,” said U.S. Forest Service specialist Dan Cottrell.

The U.S. State Department Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs funds USFS programs in Morocco. For more information, please contact Angela Trujillo angelatrujillo@fs.fed.us.