



GOVERNMENT OF BELIZE

Ministry of Fisheries, Forestry, the Environment, and Sustainable Development

And



JOINT PRESS RELEASE

Completion of fire-fighting activities

Belmopan (8th May 2020). With the recent heavy downpours over most of the country, the many fires that were creating unbearably smokey conditions in the western and central municipalities of the country are now extinguished. This brings to an end the weeks of firefighting effort by the Forest Department, the Fire Department, the Town and City Councils, and many other partner organizations. The Ministry of Fisheries, Forestry, the Environment and Sustainable Development, through valuable financial support from the Protected Areas Conservation Trust (PACT), the Belize Electricity Company Limited (BECOL), and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), was able to invest significantly in the use of aerial firefighting to help to control the unprecedented wildfires that raged through the Cayo District.

The use of airtankers in aerial firefighting proved to be successful in controlling smoke, when combined with continued ground support, and is therefore considered to have been a worthwhile investment to safeguard public health and property. Fires that posed high to medium risk to human health were extinguished and hazardous smoke suppressed using aerial support, resulting in an immediate improvement in air quality. During the flights, the pilots were also able to extinguish wildfires threatening three residential structures with certain destruction. However, continued illegal and irresponsible use of fire by members of the public posed a threat to the progress made.

In total, 187 water bombing flights were flown over the Cayo District by two aircrafts, and countless hours of on-the-ground fire mopping-up exercises were conducted on live and smouldering fires. With respect to the largest forest fire in the Vaca Forest Reserve, on-the-ground efforts were underway for several consecutive days led by the Forest Department, with financial support from the Protected Areas Conservation Trust. Smaller fires threatening the communities of Arenal and Benque were fought valiantly by community groups, NGOs, and the Fire Department. At the very end, these fires were finally extinguished by torrential rains that poured directly over the area.

As has been reported, several of these fires were as a result of agricultural work by farmers that eventually escaped into wildfires that burned rapidly through the forest as a result of extremely low relative humidity, high day-time temperatures, and strong winds. The public is reminded to avoid engaging in any fire-prone activities as once started, the fires can become uncontrollable as they expand, and will once again become a health threat/hazard to residential areas.

The collaboration between the Ministry and PACT allowed for PACT's financial contribution to boost the ongoing efforts towards successful results for the benefit of the Belizean populace. The PACT financed the aerial intervention of last week as well as helped to finance the Forest Department's groundwork in the Vaca Forest, all in support of the mutual objective of conserving biodiversity in protected areas and human health.

The Ministry and PACT wish to acknowledge the proactive work and resources coordinated by community members, local agencies, and the Forest Department staff and are also grateful to Airmax Ltd. of Spanish Lookout for their excellent service.

The Ministry, via the Forest Department, will continue implementing its fire monitoring plan as the fire season continues while the Department of the Environment is currently formulating more stringent and long-term legislative actions to prevent a reoccurrence of these unprecedented fires.

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For immediate release.

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