



Vulnerable communities

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Vulnerable communities: three countries improving national awareness of wildland fire risk

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Wildland fires generally are associated with countries such as the United States, Australia and in the Mediterranean, which have track records of large-impact wildland fires with severe social and environmental consequences. Projecting natural disasters to the Netherlands, United Kingdom and New Zealand, it is tempting to think of flooding, severe storms, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions rather than wildland fires. It is assumed that extensive fires causing fatalities and destroying homes only occur elsewhere.

The number and extent of wildland fires in our relatively small countries have been comparatively low. However, despite our temperate climates, there is a risk that the impact of these mainly human induced wildland fires will increase under climate change scenarios, as weather extremes such as heat waves and severe drought become more frequent.

In the Netherlands and New Zealand, wildland fire risks are increasing significantly as the wildland-urban interface expands. In the United Kingdom, vegetation fires in remote moorlands seriously challenge the operational strength and resilience of emergency services and, as in Spring 2011, have significant social and economic impact. An underestimation of wildland fire risk has led to under preparedness, vulnerable communities and stretched emergency services.

There is an increased need for wildfire-aware policies and active mitigation addressing issues such as increased recreational use and arson in rural areas. These are not technological issues to resolve, but socio-economical issues to be addressed. Still a mental barrier exists which prevents the acknowledgement that wildland fires are a serious risk. This lack of awareness and need for increased agency and community responsibility is a binding theme between our countries. Much knowledge can be gained from examining international experiences. The challenge is to bring together vulnerable communities and policy makers from different sectors to mitigate against the increasing wildland fire risk of the future. Exploring different approaches, this article provides food for thought to decision makers trying to make sense of a highly complex societal issue.

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