
STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

Inter-Agency Forest Fire Coordination Group



Punakha Dzongkhag

April 2026

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1. INTRODUCTION

Forest fire is one of the major causes of forest and environmental degradation. Every year, several forest fires occur across the country, burning thousands of hectares of forest. Recognizing this threat, national policy documents on forest and environmental conservation emphasize the need for effective measures to prevent and control forest fires.

In Bhutan, Punakha Dzongkhag is among with the high incidence of forest fires. This is primarily attributed to favourable conditions such as prolonged dry weather and the forest types in the area.

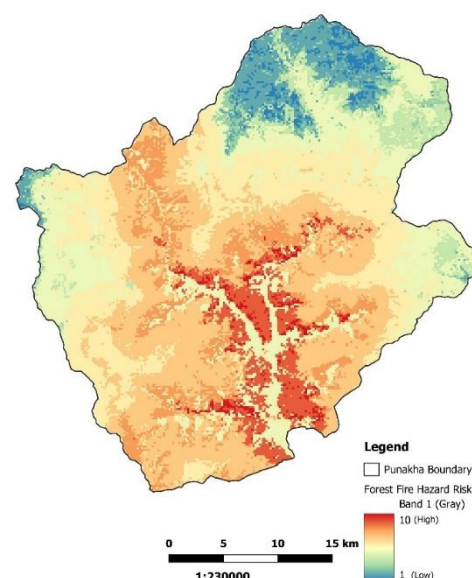
Responding to forest fire requires substantial manpower and resources. The Department of Forests alone cannot effectively address this challenge without the active support of local communities and other agencies. Moreover, even with adequate manpower from various stakeholders, the response may not be efficient unless it is guided by a well-coordinated approach.

This document, therefore, is intended to provide guidance on ensuring manpower sufficiency and establishing a coordinated procedure for efficient forest fire management. It outlines the roles, responsibilities, and engagement of different agencies, in addition to the forestry sector, in prevention and responding to forest fire incidents in the Dzongkhag.

2. FOREST FIRE STATUS AND RISK

A major portion of Punakha Dzongkhag lies within the inner dry valleys of the Himalayas, where the climate is generally dry with minimal annual rainfall. Due to these conditions, the dominant forest type along the valley slopes is *Chirpine*, which is highly susceptible to forest fires. Approximately 7.53 percent of the Dzongkhag's total area, about 8,352.88 hectares, is covered by pine forests (7078.24 ha *Chirpine* and 1274.65 ha *Bluepine*). Consequently, Punakha Dzongkhag experiences one of the highest incidences of forest fires in the country, with an average of at least 5 fire outbreaks annually, resulting in the loss of hundreds of hectares of forest each year.

Year	No. of incidence	Area burnt (ha)
2018	8	19.61
2019	9	1388.44
2020	6	520.16
2021	7	664.61
2022	1	20.23
2023	9	463.85
2024	4	235.44
2025	2	270.89



<i>Total</i>	46	3583.24
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3. POLICY BACKGROUND

Legislation	Relevance
Constitution of Bhutan, 2008	Article 5(1) <i>“Every Bhutanese is a trustee of the Kingdom’s natural resources and environment for the benefit of the present and future generations and it is the fundamental duty of every citizen to contribute to the protection of the natural environment, conservation of the rich biodiversity of Bhutan and prevention of all forms of ecological degradation including noise, visual and physical pollution through the adoption and support of environment friendly practices and policies.”</i> Article 5(3) <i>“The Government shall ensure that, in order to conserve the country’s natural resources and to prevent degradation of the ecosystem, a minimum of sixty percent of Bhutan’s total land shall be maintained under forest cover for all time.”</i>
Forest & Nature Conservation Act of Bhutan, 2023	Section 73 <i>Prevention and protection of forest fire hazard shall be the fundamental duty of every Bhutanese.</i> Section 76 <i>The Department shall institute Inter-Agency Forest Fire Coordination Group to combat forest fire and Community-based Forest Fire Management Group to prevent, combat and manage forest fire.</i>
Forest and Nature Conservation Rules and Regulations of Bhutan 2023	Section 152 <i>The Department shall institute Inter-Agency Forest Fire Coordination Group and Community based Forest Fire Management Group.</i>
Disaster Management Act of Bhutan 2013	Section 67 <i>An agency notified by the National Disaster Management Authority shall:</i> <i>a) Prepare, implement, review and update Disaster Management and Contingency Plan in accordance with the guideline formulated under this Act;</i> Section 76 <i>Every agency and private sector notified under sections 67 and 68 of this Act shall prepare its Disaster Management and Contingency Plan</i>

4. GOAL

To enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of forest fire management through a coordinated, collaborative, and multi-agency approach that strengthens response actions, promotes proactive prevention measures, and ensures active participation of all relevant stakeholders and agencies in safeguarding forest and natural resources from fire hazards.

5. OBJECTIVES

1. To mobilize and integrate manpower, equipment, and other resources from all participating agencies for efficient forest fire management.
2. To establish a coordinated and systematic approach for organizing and deploying forest fire response teams.
3. To ensure clear command, communication, and operational guidance for all firefighting personnel.
4. To uphold and promote the safety and well-being of all fire responders during operations.
5. To enhance preparedness and response capacity for timely and effective forest fire suppression.
6. To foster inter-agency collaboration and joint participation in forest fire prevention activities that require collective effort and large-scale manpower.

6. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

As members of the Inter-Agency Forest Fire Coordination Group (IFFCG), all participating agencies must provide manpower and transport support using their available vehicles. Beyond this general obligation, specific roles and responsibilities align with each agency's professional mandate, as outlined below:

Sl. No.	Agency	Roles and Responsibilities
1	Divisional Forest Office	➤ Lead the establishment and development of the Inter-Agency Forest Fire Coordination Group (IFFCG). ➤ Initiate procurement and supply of firefighting tools and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). ➤ Convene and coordinate IFFCG meetings. ➤ Conduct advocacy and awareness programs on forest fire prevention. ➤ Coordinate and implement prevention measures, including fire line construction and prescribed burning. ➤ Perform post-fire assessments and prepare reports. ➤ Maintain records of IFFCG activities and forest fire incidents. ➤ Explore and mobilize funding support for IFFCG initiatives. ➤ Deliver firefighting training and capacity-building programs.

2	Dzongkhag Administration	➤ Arrange transportation of firefighters during large-scale deployments or when agencies are unable to provide transport for their personnel. ➤ Provide meals and refreshments for firefighters during operations when responding personnel cannot make such arrangements.
4	Royal Bhutan Police	➤ Provide manpower support for firefighting operations. ➤ Manage traffic control in forest fire-affected areas when necessary. ➤ Offer fire brigade support during forest fire incidents.
6	Gewog Administration	➤ Arrange refreshments in consultation with the Dzongkhag Disaster Management Office. ➤ Issue permits for debris burning. ➤ Deploy Quick Response Teams (QRTs) alongside forestry personnel stationed in or near the Gewog.
7	Bhutan Power Corporation Limited	➤ Control and manage power supply in and around forest fire affected areas when required. ➤ Create firebreaks around substations and transmission lines before the onset of fire season. ➤ Remove overhanging branches or trees posing risk to power infrastructure.
8	Dzongkhag Desuup Office	➤ Manpower support.
9	Dzongkhag Medical Officer	➤ Provide medical emergencies as and when required.

7. PRE-INCIDENT PLANNING AND PREPAREDNESS

7.1. Nomination of Focal Officers

Each agency shall nominate a focal officer to serve as the primary contact point for coordinating firefighting activities. The agency head is preferred as the focal officer; however, for larger agencies where it may not be feasible for the head to directly engage in IFFCG-related responsibilities, an alternative focal person may be designated.

A communication group shall be created to include all nominated focal officers. This group will be reviewed and validated annually prior to the fire season to ensure it is up to date and fully functional. During this validation, any focal officer who has transferred, resigned, or otherwise left the agency shall be removed and replaced by a new nominee as recommended by the respective agency.

The Divisional Forest Office shall lead and coordinate this entire process.

Sl. No.	Agency	Focal member
1	Dzongkhag Administration	Dasho Dzongdag and DDMO
2	RBP	Dasho SSP, Dasho OC Wangdue and Zawakha
3	Gewog (9)	Gup and Mangmi

4	Desuung	Coordinator
5	BPC	Manager
6	DoST	Chief Engineer

7.2. Firefighting Training

Ideally, all individuals participating in firefighting operations should be adequately trained to ensure both efficiency and safety. However, the scope of training will depend on the availability of funds. Unless member agencies are willing to participate in the training without requiring financial support for DSA and food, the Divisional Forest Office shall take responsibility for providing basic firefighting training.

7.3. Quick Response Team (QRT)

Forest fires are often unpredictable and can spread rapidly. Immediate response is therefore critical, as it can save significant time and resources in containing and extinguishing the fire. To facilitate swift action, establishing a predetermined Quick Response Team (QRT) will be highly beneficial. Such a team can be mobilized quickly and will not require large manpower to initiate the first response.

Given that all agency members including the forestry sector have other mandates beyond forest fire management, retaining personnels exclusively for this role seems impractical. Therefore, first responders (QRT) shall be drawn from local communities within respective Gewog, operating in close coordination with stationed forestry personnel.

7.4. Meetings and Discussions

The Chief Forestry Officer (CFO) shall coordinate and convene IFFCG meetings at least once a year. Additional meetings may be called as needed, based on situational demands and urgency.

8. OPERATING PROCEDURES

Forest fire responses shall adhere to a simplified Incident Command System (ICS) to ensure clear communication channels, effective coordination, and unequivocal accountability during incidents.

8.1. Command Structure

8.1.1. Incident Commander

Dasho Dzongdag of the Dzongkhag Administration will serve as the Incident Commander (IC), holding ultimate authority over all forest fire response operations within the Interagency Forest Fire Coordination Group (IFFCG) framework. As the apex decision-maker, the IC is vested with comprehensive oversight responsibilities, including strategic planning, resource mobilization, operational approvals, and final decision-making authority to ensure seamless inter-agency coordination and effective fire suppression. In the event of the Dasho Dzongdag's unavailability, the Dzongrab shall assume the IC role, maintaining continuity of command.

8.1.2. Incident Manager/Operation Lead

The Chief Forestry Officer (CFO) of the Divisional Forest Office shall serve as the Incident Manager / Operations Lead responsible for providing clear directives, orchestrating seamless coordination among all responding agencies including the Royal Bhutan Police (RBP), Dessung, and local authorities and ensuring the efficient execution of suppression, assessment, and support operations.

8.1.3. Operation Unit

The Operational Unit shall encompass a dedicated Rapid Response Team (RRT) comprising the following core team members, who are collectively responsible for the timely suppression and containment. This unit will operate under the direct supervision of the Incident Manager / Operations Lead (Chief Forestry Officer) and execute frontline tactical operations to minimize fire spread, protect lives, property, and ecosystems:

1. Fire Suppression Team
2. Forestry personnel
3. Quick Response Team (QRT)
4. Volunteers and agency staff

8.2. Logistics Arrangement

In the event of a forest fire occurrence within the dzongkhag, all necessary logistics arrangements shall be coordinated by the Dzongkhag Administration under the overarching authority of the Incident Commander (Dasho Dzongdag). This unit ensures the seamless provision of critical resources, equipment, transportation, and support services to the Operational Unit and Coordination Group, thereby facilitating uninterrupted fire suppression, containment, and post-incident recovery operations within the Interagency Forest Fire Coordination Group (IFFCG) framework.

8.3. Safety and Medical Support

Safety and Medical Support Unit shall operate under the direct oversight of the Incident Commander (Dasho Dzongdag), to ensure safety protocols and deliver immediate medical care. The CMO of the Dzongkhag shall be the focal point for this unit and the unit shall be responsible for:

- Deployment of a dedicated Medical Team (personnel from Health Sector/Dessung trained in wilderness first aid) with first-aid kits, oxygen and burn dressings.
- Pre-positioning ambulances at nearest roadhead to facilitate immediate transport of injured/sick personnels.
- Responsible for firefighter safety and medical emergencies.

8.4. Support Agencies

The Support Agencies shall form an integral component of the Interagency Forest Fire Coordination Group (IFFCG), providing specialized manpower, technical expertise, and logistical reinforcement to augment core operations led by the Incident Commander, Incident Manager/Operations Lead, Operational Unit, Logistics Arrangements, and Safety and Medical Support Unit.

Key Support Agencies and their delineated responsibilities include:

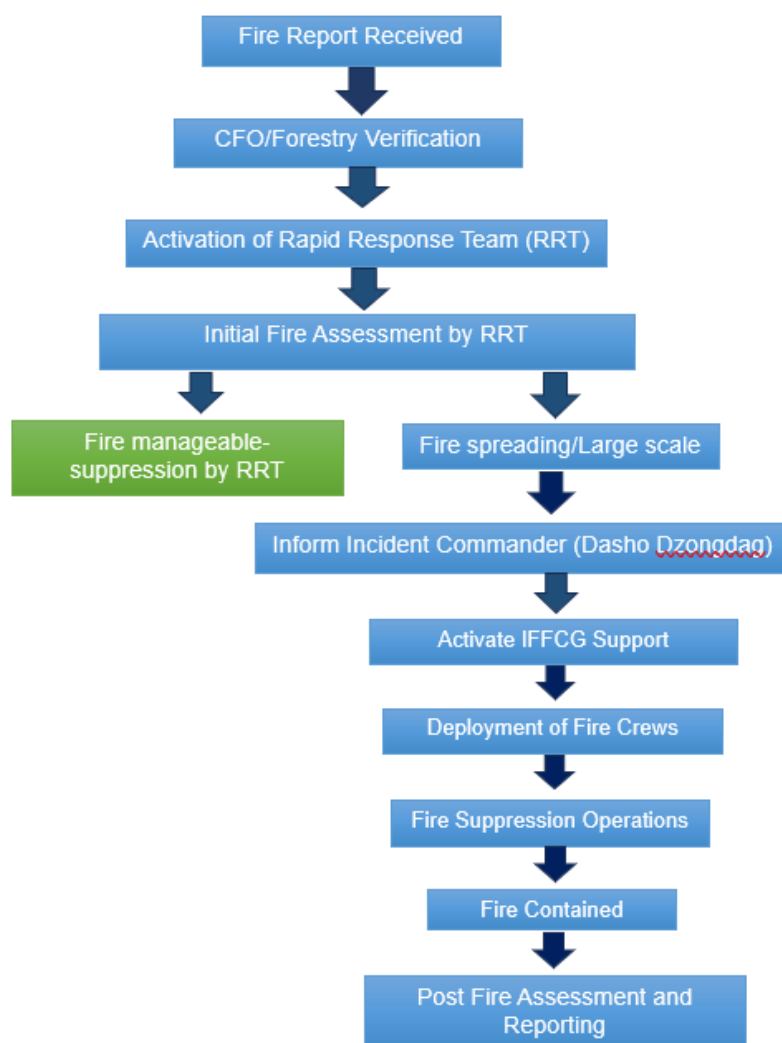
1) **Royal Bhutan Police (RBP):**

- Deployment of manpower for fire suppression, crowd/traffic control at fire sites and evacuation routes.
- Activation of fire brigade units for interface fires near settlements, Lhakhangs, or power infrastructure.

2) **Bhutan Power Corporation (BPC):**

- Ensuring power line safety through immediate inspections, de-energization of at-risk lines, and trimming of overhanging vegetation in high-fire zones.
- Prevention patrols in fire areas prone to detect faulty lines and coordination for post-fire infrastructure repairs.
- Provision of technical advisors for electrical hazards during suppression to prevent secondary ignitions.

8.5. Forest Fire Response Flow Chart



8.6. Fire Crew Organization Structure

Fire crews form the operational backbone of forest fire suppression, organized hierarchically for efficiency, safety, and clear command during incidents. This structure aligns with the simplified Incident Command System (ICS), enabling scalable responses from initial attack to prolonged operations.

8.6.1. Crew Structure

A member agency deploying fire fighters shall ensure to nominate a team leader amongst the firefighters from their agency. The team leader shall preferably be one with experience in firefighting or one with good coordination and command.

8.6.2. Crew Responsibilities

Team Leader

- Ensure crew safety
- Assign tasks
- Responsible for directing the crew and communicating with the Incident Manager
- Communicate progress and challenges

Firefighters

- Fireline construction
- Suppression of fire with fire beaters
- Removing combustible materials
- Monitoring fire spread

8.7. Firefighter Safety Protocol

Safety shall be the highest priority during all firefighting operations.

Basic Safety Measures

- All personnel should wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) whenever available.
- No firefighter shall work alone; teams must operate in groups.
- Maintain constant awareness of fire direction, wind conditions, and terrain.
- Avoid working upslope directly above active fire.
- Identify safe escape routes and safety zones before beginning suppression work.
- Maintain adequate hydration and rest breaks.
- Immediately withdraw crews if the fire becomes uncontrollable or poses a risk to life.

Personal Protective Equipment list (if available)

- Helmet
- Gloves
- Fire resistant clothing

- Boots
- Eye protection
- Face mask

8.8. Communication Protocol

Effective communication is critical for coordinated forest fire response.

Communication Channels

Primary communication

- Mobile phone communication
- Messaging groups (e.g., official coordination chat groups)

Secondary communication

- Wireless radio communication (if available)

Communication Procedures

1. The first-person receiving fire information must immediately inform the forestry office.
2. The forestry office shall verify and if needed inform the Incident Commander (Dzongdag)
3. All focal officers shall remain on station during fire season.
4. Operational updates shall be shared regularly through the designated communication group.
5. Any emergency situation or casualty must be reported immediately to the Incident Commander or Incident Manager.