



TRANSFORMING LIVES STORIES

Communities in Northern Lebanon Mobilize to Reduce Risk of Wildfires

USAID Provides Income for Vulnerable Households While Increasing Resilience to Fire Disasters



Ahmed Abdel Khader, cash-for-work beneficiary from Akroum, Akkar

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“Each year, the fires become increasingly unmanageable, turning our beautiful landscape into a living hell,” stated George Saad, volunteer at the Qbaiyat Civil Defense firefighting service. Indeed, between 2020 and 2021, fires destroyed more than 3000 hectares of forested areas in Akkar Governorate alone. The recurring fires have also ignited longstanding tensions and sectarian divisions among the communities.

The impact of forest wildfires in Akkar is compounded by the country’s ongoing socio-economic crisis and soaring unemployment rate, which is estimated at 70%. Moreover, this remote governorate in northern Lebanon has one of the highest rates of household poverty in Lebanon (63%) with many residents reporting that they are unable to cover their food expenses and other basic needs. To support three of the worst-affected communities by wildfires in Akkar – which include Qbaiyat, Akroum and Aandqet – during the summer of 2022, USAID’s Community Support Program (CSP) implemented a cash-for-work project that provided hundreds of daily workers with \$220 each over a four-week period to carry out a range of forest-cleaning works, including the removal of dead trees and other flammable debris. Overall, by the end of September 2022, workers had cleared around 36,000 m² of land in the three villages.

“I have two children, one of whom is severely disabled, and my husband was diagnosed with cancer last year,” shared Inaam Elias, CFW beneficiary and resident from Qbaiyat. “It has been difficult to find employment during these times; this work is helping my family make ends meet.” Similarly, 29-year-old resident from Akroum and father of three young children, Ahmed Abdel Khader, shared the hardships endured during this time of crisis and the hope that this project offers the community: “Before this, I was unemployed; there are very few economic opportunities in these areas. Earning a living while maintaining the forest is rewarding and motivating.”

“This is the best project anyone has done for us since the beginning of the crisis,” stated Georgina Khoury from Qbaiyat, “Every year, fires devastate the lands and community members risk their lives to put the fires out. It is much better to prevent fires through the work we are doing. Despite everything, we have hope that tomorrow will be better.”

Having initially benefitted 366 workers, this intervention was expanded to engage an additional 134 participants from the villages of Aakkar and Aatiqa and is expected to be completed by the end of March 2023. This is one of five CFW projects implemented by CSP, which together, have directly benefitted more than 1,300 households across Akkar, the Beqaa Valley, south Lebanon, and Beirut. The overall purpose of these types of projects is to provide much-needed economic relief to some of the country’s most vulnerable families amidst the socio-economic crisis afflicting Lebanon.