

On uncontrolled forest fires in Southern Europe

On the day of 15th October huge forest fires took over many places in Southern Europe leading to massive destruction and dramatic loss of lives and goods. A combination of several factors led to an unprecedented wave of fires that remained uncontrolled during the following days.

Abnormal weather conditions for October, including high temperatures, very strong winds originated by the Ophelia storm and a severe and prolonged drought period, tragically hit a vulnerable and potentially explosive forest and landscape. Those were very dark days in Portugal, France, Italy, Spain and other countries in Europe.

In these days, in Portugal, more than 200.000 hectares were consumed by the flames, more than 45 lives were taken, and more than 700 fire ignitions were reported. In the North of Spain (Galicia and Asturias mainly) these vast fires resulted in four dead people. In Corsica, France, 2000 hectares were burnt.

Many of these Southern European countries have experienced a historical record of forest fires this year. In Portugal, more than 440.000 hectares of land have been burned and more than 110 people were killed trapped by the fires.

Although forest fires are a common and natural occurrence in the Mediterranean region and its ecosystems, the man-induced modifications, especially in the forest composition and agriculture type, have increased the vulnerability of the Mediterranean territory to forest fires that are no longer occurring within the natural pattern, and which thus have much more tragic consequences.

This has been the result of inadequate forest policies, leading to depopulation of rural areas, to the abandonment of the traditional, diverse and difficult-to-burn agricultural landscape, and its replacement by homogeneous pine forest and scrubland or extensive flammable monocultures such as eucalyptus. The uncontrolled expansion of settlements and infrastructure in natural and rural areas is adding great risks to human life. Also, in Italy, France, Spain and Portugal fires were often provoked by intentional arsonists or by carelessness.

To some extent, the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) supports and promotes big corporations, enabling them to compete in the international market. By doing so, the CAP kills small farmers and traditional agriculture. This not only leads to the desertification of the rural areas leaving them without surveillance, but also destroys the agriculture fields that have worked in the past as stopgaps between forested areas, thus slowing and stopping wild fires.

The forest fires are a recurrent tragedy and the vulnerability of the Southern European forest to fires is a big issue. The sustainability of the forest and agriculture policies have been a core issue for the Greens. Currently the Portuguese Greens have been negotiating with the Government to halt the growth of the eucalyptus tree area. This has been a hard issue to negotiate, but finally is reaching the light of day. In Portugal the forest area represents 35% of the territory, and the forestry industry is a heavy weight in the economy. Following the demand of this industry, nowadays eucalyptus areas represent more than 26% of the Portuguese forest. This is a direct result of the promotion of pulp & paper industry in replacement of the more traditional woods of oaks, chestnuts and maritime pine tree (for construction and furniture industries), of the cork tree (and associated cork industry), and last but not the least, of the traditional Portuguese agriculture.

In Greece, more than 5.5 million acres of forest and farmland were burnt in the past 10 years, with multiple consequences not only in terms of biodiversity loss, human losses, enormous economic damage but also causing the desertification of soil due to erosion and loss of soil structure, groundwater level decline, and catastrophic floods from the intense weather phenomena that appear more and more frequently.

In France, even if the amount of area burnt has decreased since the 1990s as the firefighters are better equipped and the tools to detect and prevent the fires are more efficient, the risk of forest fire is nevertheless bound to increase.

In 2017, in Italy more than 141.000 hectares of land burnt, 316% more than the average of last 10 years. The sum of land burnt from 2010 to 2017 reaches 446.919 hectares. The economical loss amounts to 900 million euro only in 2017, since 2010 the total amount of damages is more than 9 billion euro. From 2000 to 2015, 71% of fires were man-made. 87 European relevant natural sites in Italy have been hit by fires. 5.684 people have been incriminated of which 181 drawn in arrest in flagrancy of crime or submitted to measures of custody.

The annual budget allocated to forest fires by the EU, the state and the local authorities amounts to half a billion euros, 2/3 of which are used to fight the fires, 1/3 to prevent them. This does not take into account the environmental damages and the cost to repair them.

In some of these countries, the depletion of public services such as forest surveillance ones, especially during austerity times, and the lack of technical means to tackle and fight the fires contributed to a progressively weakened ability to effectively address this problem.

At the global level, 29.7 million hectares were destroyed in 2016 by the fire, as much as New Zealand territory, and more than 51% than in 2015.

Indeed, the increased temperatures and drought exacerbate the risk of forest fire since they increase the length of the fire season and the size and location of the risk areas to more areas where it will be more difficult to fight the fire. Moreover, growing urban sprawl and the decrease in logging that leads to less clearing, also puts our forests at risk.

Climate change will further add to this explosive mix with increased occurrence of drought periods and very warm temperatures. Therefore, while implementing much needed adaptation measures is essential, such as replacing eucalyptus with more fire resilient species, climate change mitigation is equally important.

The Paris agreement needs to be implemented urgently. Innovative and transformative transport policies, renewable energy and meat production need to be designed and implemented. It is imperative to reduce the use of fossil fuels, to effectively and massively promote public transport, the local food production and, if not possible, the sustainable transportation of goods, and reduce meat production. To do so, it is necessary to reform the Common Agriculture Policy and to promote and focus on small-scale agriculture, farmers and local markets.

The forest fires also show the extent of environmental activities: if they impact everyone, those who have less are the least equipped to deal with its consequences, defend their goods and prepare their future after the fires. We need to rethink our systems of solidarity so that they include the loss and damages from environmental destruction and involve the polluters in dealing with any damage which has a human cause.

The European Greens:

1. Express their solidarity with the victims' families and with the countries affected by forest fires;
2. Call for greater action on forest fires due to climate change and extreme weather conditions, especially in the Mediterranean region, which is particularly badly affected. This has to be taken into consideration to prevent and tackle forest fires;
3. Encourage reform of the Common Agriculture Policy in order to support small-scale farmers and local crops and markets, ensuring that rural areas are kept alive;
4. Call on the European Commission and Member States to ensure coherence and consistency across EU policies to guarantee the transition of the CAP from agro-business monocultures towards the financing of biodiverse agro-ecosystems. This remains the most efficient way to prevent forest fires;
5. Believe it is imperative to return to original more acclimatised forest that is more resistant to wild fires;
6. Call for the possibility of excluding public expenses and investments to address the victims of fire, the reconstruction of destroyed areas and the reinforcement of public services from the deficit calculation;



Adopted EGP Resolution

7. Acknowledge the new possibility for the EU to co-finance up to 95% of the reconstruction efforts linked to natural disasters and ask for a bigger share of the ESI funds to be devoted to climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as to risk prevention and management in the future;
8. Call for the strengthening of the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS);
9. Call on the European Union to create a Prevention Center on Fires with structural funds;
10. Propose building a network of European Security Systems for Environmental matters and the security system for the control of the region should not be terminated;
11. Believe more resources have to be devoted to public environmental prosecution services;
12. Call for new measures to be taken into consideration during the critical period of fires.