



European
Commission

© European Union, 2018 (photographer: Pavel Koubek)

Last updated 29/11/2022

European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

Forest fires

What is it?

Forest fires are uncontrolled fires that occur in nature, often rendered more severe by climatic conditions. Long dry spells increase the risk of forest fires breaking out.

Some factors have a significant bearing on the scale of forest fires, e.g., weather conditions, such as rain and wind; vegetation; the layout of the terrain; as well as forest management practices.

2022 has been a record-breaking year, with one of the worst forest fire seasons in the EU. Forest fires also severely affected North-West America, Siberia, South Asia, and many other regions worldwide. Lives were lost, livelihoods destroyed, and many hectares of land burnt.

Why is this important?

The fire risk is expected to further increase due to climate change. It will be increasingly characterised by massive fires that cost lives and burn areas that take longer to fully recover. Between 2007 and 2021, over 17% of all requests for assistance through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism were in response to forest fires.

When national response capacities are overwhelmed by fire intensity, the State can activate the EU Civil Protection Mechanism to ask for a coordinated, rapid and effective international response. When fires of such magnitude occur, EU Member States and participating states regularly show solidarity by sending assistance in the form of firefighting planes, helicopters, firefighting equipment, and teams.

In addition to the response, the EU supports and complements prevention and preparedness efforts of these States by focusing on areas where a joint European approach is more effective than separate national actions. These include risk assessments to identify the disaster risks across the EU, encouraging research to promote disaster resilience and reinforcing early warning tools.

Prevention, preparedness and response work hand in hand to save human lives and limit the further spread of fires. Having experienced forest fire experts, well-trained firefighters, technology and other assets available near the location of action makes a difference. While the national and regional authorities of these States manage forest fire prevention, preparedness and response activities, the EU can co-finance and coordinate further support when needed.

How are we helping?

The EU Civil Protection Mechanism coordinates pan-European assistance and ensures that all EU Member States and participating states to the Mechanism receive timely information in times of crises and emergencies. Upon its activation by any country worldwide, the Mechanism ensures the rapid deployment of resources and personnel that are tailor-made to fit the needs of each emergency.

At the operational heart of the Mechanism lies the European Commission's Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC). The Centre monitors forest fire risks and emergencies across Europe, supported by national and European monitoring services such as the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS).

So far this year, the ERCC has channelled assistance to Czechia, France, Germany, Portugal, Slovenia and Albania, with 33 planes and 8 helicopters deployed and over 360 firefighters on the ground.

Furthermore, the Copernicus Emergency Management Service (EMS) regularly produces satellite maps on demand to help national authorities respond to forest fires. In 2022, Copernicus has produced 322 maps of areas affected by forest fires across our globe.

At the onset of the forest fire season each year, the ERCC engages with national authorities from EU Member States and participating states. The aim is to exchange information on the status of prevention, preparedness and response activities and maintains close contact with national authorities throughout the forest fire season.

Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Greece, and Croatia are the most fire-prone countries in Europe, but recent events have shown that northern European countries are not immune.

When national response capacities to fight forest fires are overwhelmed, the Mechanism coordinates assistance in the form of forest firefighting aircraft and helicopters, firefighting equipment, personnel and expertise. Additionally, the Mechanism can co-finance the transport of assistance to the affected area as well as operational costs.

In March 2019, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism was upgraded to establish a new European reserve of capacities (the 'rescEU reserve') which includes firefighting planes and helicopters. For the 2022 forest fire season, the European Commission co-finances the stand-by availability of additional aerial forest fire-fighting capacities to address potential shortcomings in responding to fires.

Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Spain and Sweden put together 12 firefighting planes and 1 helicopter at the disposal of other EU Member States in case of an emergency. The new system also sees greater investment in knowledge sharing and preparedness activities.

The EU actively supports forest fire prevention and fighting, the restoration of burned land, and education and awareness-raising measures through its Regional Development Fund and Rural Development Fund.

Facts & figures

Forest fires affect all European Union territories, from north to south, east to west.

Forest fire prevention, preparedness and response activities are closely intertwined.

Upon request, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism helps to coordinate rapid support for forest fires.

rescEU is an additional reserve capacity that boosts the EU's ability to prepare for and respond to forest fires.