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Forest and vegetation fires in Greece 2024: Challenges, Impact & International aid

An analysis of the number of fires, the challenges and international aid

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The year 2024 in Greece was marked by numerous and devastating forest fires¹. This season once again represented a considerable burden for the Greek civil protection and civil protection as well as the fire brigades. The damage to the environment was high, although it should be noted that significantly less area was burned than in the previous year. The government's measures for early detection fires, the equipment of fire brigades, the reduction of fire loads and the harsh penalties for arsonists seem to be having an effect.

This report analyses the main causes and effects of the fires in Greece, compares the figures with 2023, identifies the structures of civil protection and presents international aid and its possibilities for improvement.

¹ The technically correct term is: forest and vegetation fires. For the sake of simplicity, however, only the term forest fires is used.

Wildfires 2024: An alarming increase in fires

First of all, it can be stated that forest fires are not uncommon in Greece, but in recent years the intensity and frequency has increased due to extreme climatic events, the geographical nature and changing environmental conditions.

In 2024, the country recorded an alarming increase in fire events to about 9,500 registered fires, which is an increase of 7.4% compared to the average of the years 2006-2023. The coastal regions and hilly terrain around Athens were particularly affected, where the combination of hot, dry summer months and strong winds significantly increased the risk of fire. The southern Peloponnesian peninsula and the Aegean islands also experienced an exceptionally high number of fire events.



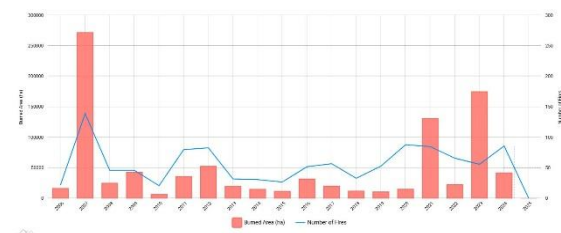
Source: Greek Ministry of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection

The forest fire season in Greece traditionally begins in spring, when temperatures rise and vegetation dries out, and peaks in midsummer. This year, however, the forest fire season lasted until the end of November, which is related to the long dry period in southern Greece from May to November. The Minister of Civil Protection, Vasilis Kikilias, said: "Here I would like to emphasize, as it is very likely that we will face this phenomenon much more often in the future, and I made it clear that a high number of fires occurred outside the [classic] fire protection season. Of the total of 9,500 fires in 2024, 3,525 occurred before or after

the fire protection period - with all the associated consequences."

However, it can be said that most vegetation fires were quickly localized and effectively fought. As a result, only around 42,000 hectares burned in 2024, while 174,000 hectares of forest and vegetation fell victim to the flames in 2023. Compared to the 20-year average of 51,500 hectares per year, the area affected in 2024 will also be significantly lower at 42,000 hectares.

New drone and camera technology, the efficient use of firefighting aircraft and helicopters were the reasons for the effective firefighting. Furthermore, there is a high level of awareness among the population for forest fire prevention and high prison sentences are accepted for arsonists.



Cause of the fires

The majority of forest fires in Greece are caused by human activities. According to WWF, up to 95% of fires in the last 20 years are due to negligence or intentional actions such as humans. In 2024, the Greek authorities reported over 7,000 fires that were proven to be caused by human causes such as improper land management, defective power lines or intentional or negligent arson. Historical data confirm this trend: between 1983 and 2008, around 84% of all forest fires were of human origin. Intentional arson plays a particularly important role and is responsible for up to 50% of cases in some years. Therefore, the penalties for arsonists have been significantly tightened, there are numerous arrests, but due to slow judicial processes, the conviction and imprisonment sometimes take several years. In addition, climate change is significantly exacerbating the conditions for forest fires.

Extremely high temperatures and long dry periods favor the development of fires and their rapid spread, which are fanned in summer by hot and dry winds of up to 8-9 wind forces.

Another factor is the increasing urbanization in and around large cities such as Athens. Housing estates are increasingly encroaching on formerly forested areas, which increases the risk of fires and makes firefighting more difficult (wildland-urban interface). This leads to "wild urbanization" along densely forested regions, which significantly reduces fire safety.

In addition, the resettlement of rural areas (people are moving more and more to the big cities) leads to a reconquest of nature and a growth of vegetation that did not occur decades ago, this also creates more space and material for forest fires, as formerly agricultural land is no longer cultivated and vegetation creates new fire loads.

On a positive note, fire detection and fighting have been significantly improved. In the area of preventive fire protection (aisles, extinguishing wells, planting, management, etc.), however, there are still considerable deficits that can be found in the structures of forest management and its responsibility in Greece. This strategy and concept of preventive fire protection in the forests, which has not yet been unified and enforced, also contributes to the increase in forest fires.

Large fires around Athens

The capital Athens, which has already been affected by devastating forest fires in the past, experienced another dramatic period of fire in the summer of 2024. The area of Menidi, west of Athens, was particularly hard hit. The fire, which broke out at the end of June 2024, destroyed over 1,200 hectares of forest and threatened densely populated areas. Numerous houses, farms and infrastructure were damaged, and thousands of people had to be evacuated to safety.

These fires not only had a physical impact on the environment and infrastructure, but also on the quality of life of the city's population. Air quality deteriorated significantly due to dense smoke, which led to an increase in respiratory diseases, especially among the elderly and children.

Another large fire broke out on 12 August 2024 near Penteli, a region that has been frequently affected by forest fires in the past. Strong winds made extinguishing attempts difficult, and the flames spread quickly. More than 30,000 people had to be evacuated. Coordinating firefighting required the deployment of hundreds of firefighters and international support.

The Greek Civil Protection and its Structures

Greece has a well-organized civil protection system, but it always reaches its limits when faced with a large number of major fires at the same time. The Greek Civil Protection, under the leadership of the "General Secretariat for Civil Protection", is the central institution for the coordination and implementation of rescue and relief measures in the event of disasters.

Fire brigade and air support

The fire brigade plays a crucial role in the fight against forest fires. In 2024, the fire brigade was active with about 8,500 full-time firefighters, supported by volunteers and professional rescue units, which still play a subordinate role compared to Germany, as they are usually not yet integrated into the existing state structures. In addition, Greece is increasingly relying on air support, such as firefighting planes and helicopters, to reach mountainous areas that are difficult to access and extensive burned areas. In 2024, in addition to the 40 national aircraft and helicopters used for firefighting from the air, an additional 49 firefighting aircraft leased from the Greek government were available.

Coordination & Communication

Another important element of civil protection in Greece is communication and coordinated cooperation between various state agencies, municipalities and civil society. In 2024, modern technologies such as satellite imagery, drones and cameras were increasingly used to monitor the fire areas in real time and act quickly. Due to better detection and central coordination of the units, flying units are sometimes on site after only 10 minutes to start fighting the fire.

In addition, warning systems for the population have been further improved. There are nationwide early warning systems for extreme weather events, in which emergency warnings are sent directly to citizens' mobile phones via Cells Broadcast.

Despite this progress, there have been criticisms in some cases about the efficiency of response times and coordination on the ground, especially in the case of the fires around Athens, where firefighting was hampered by the dense residential area and difficult accessibility.

International support

International cooperation was strengthened in the larger fire areas around Athens, with neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Italy and France also offering help in the form of fire brigades and aircraft. This cross-border cooperation is an essential part of modern civil protection, which is indispensable in times of acute crises such as these.

However, it is noticeable that Germany has taken on a less active role in this context. This was probably due less to the commitment of the Foreign Office and the German institutions on the ground, but rather to the willingness of the responsible security authorities in the federal system of the Federal Republic to provide appropriate resources. While countries such as Romania, France and the Czech Republic reacted quickly and sent both personnel and urgently needed technology within 1-3 days, German support was largely limited to symbolic gestures and selective measures. For example, a firefighting aircraft from the Braunschweig site was offered, but it was already financed by EUrescue and is specially intended for such operations. This does not represent an additional German initiative, but merely the use of an already existing EU infrastructure. The only downer was

that the German government would have taken over the Greek share of its own resources for this aircraft. Due to the special requirements of this aircraft, however, it was ultimately no longer requested by Greece.

This reluctance raises questions about Germany's willingness and ability to act effectively in crisis situations within the framework of European solidarity. Especially in view of German capacities and technological possibilities, this reaction seems difficult to understand. Germany has well-equipped fire brigade units that can operate in international structures and specialized technology for disaster control, which could be invaluable in such crises. The fire brigade and THW could be stationed autonomously in fire engines and integrated into the existing structures during the summer. Nevertheless, it seemed that there was a lack of organizational flexibility and political will to move these resources to Greece quickly and purposefully.

The consequences of this restraint could not only burden cooperation within the EU but also call into question Germany's claim to a leading role in European crisis issues. Solidarity in the EU is not only reflected in political declarations, but above all in action – especially when help is urgently needed. Especially for the strained German-Greek relationship, such support would not only be a gesture, but it would be seen as help from true friends.

Resume

The 2024 forest fire season in Greece has shown that despite a higher number of fires, the burned area could be significantly reduced through targeted measures. Nevertheless, the long-term challenges remain: climate change, urbanization and the effective coordination of civil protection measures continue to require sustainable.

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