



Greece: The Fires of 2013

According to the Hellenic Firefighting Corps (HFC), the fire season of 2013 in Greece was a relatively difficult one. In regard to the fuels there was initially a strong growth of grasses due to higher than average rainfall, but the resulting increased amount of dead fuel dried-up very early as the rains stopped. Throughout the summer, fire weather favored the start and growth of forest fires: 77 out of the 92 days on June, July and August, had a maximum predicted fire danger index of 3 (high) or 4 (very high) in the 5-degree scale used in Greece. Additional difficulties for the HFC came in the form of budget cuts (15% compared to the budget of 2012) and a ban on hiring new permanent firefighters to replace those retiring, due to the financial problems and restrictions that Greece is facing.

In an effort to minimize the negative effects of reduced funding, the HFC and the General Secretariat for Civil Protection (GSCP) tried to use the available funds more efficiently, turning towards better cooperation between relevant organizations and devoting some effort on prevention, which is usually neglected. More specifically, the GSCP made sure that funding for prevention to the local authorities (municipalities), although reduced (18.4 million euros in 2013 versus 32 million euros in 2009) was distributed in April in order to be put to good use with the start of the fire season in May. Furthermore the GSCP, elaborated and issued directions on the criteria and procedures for determining and executing evacuation of the public in case of wildfire threat to wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas. According to these directions, the decision is to be made by the local mayor after recommendation of the HFC officer in charge of the firefighting operations in the area.

As one Canadair CL-215 and a CL-415 became unavailable due to technical problems, it was decided that a number of Chinook CH-47D helicopters operated by the Army Air Force, will become available to support the efforts of the HFC upon request. The history of use of these helicopters in aerial firefighting in Greece goes back in 1994, but they stopped being used for firefighting after 1998 except for some extreme cases. The HFC also started using a small fleet of helicopters it owns (three BK 117 C1 and two Eurocopter AS 332 L1 SUPER PUMA) for fire reconnaissance (transmitting video to the Central Coordination Facility in Athens) and coordination of aerial and ground firefighting resources from the air.

Additionally, in the field of prevention, the HFC put more emphasis on fire investigation by increasing the personnel of the corresponding Direction. It also mobilized firefighters on 110 motorcycles for patrolling the forests, especially on high fire danger days and hours. Finally, it started reporting the burned areas directly to the organization (OPEKEPE) of the Ministry of Rural Development and Food that is responsible for managing European Union subsidies to shepherds. As burned forest areas, after being mapped, are declared “under reforestation” by the Forest Service, grazing of sheep and goats in them is not allowed for a period up to 10 years to protect regenerating plants. According to current rules, a subsidy is given to the shepherd according to the land he has available for his animals to graze. If this land is burned, the information passes from the HFC to OPEKEPE which has to stop subsidizing that shepherd for as long as he cannot legally lead his animals to this land for grazing. In Greece, shepherds cause up to 20% of the wildland fires. Facing immediate cut of subsidies if their land burns, shepherds are much less likely to start fires than in the past.

Results

According to the data published by the HFC, the total burned area, as a result of 10,196 fires, reached 27,092 ha. This total included 750 ha of tall forests and 11,059 ha of other forests lands, and, being about half of the long term average can be considered as a successful result. Furthermore, the arrest of roughly 200 people accused as responsible for starting fires, either accidentally or on purpose, can be credited to the Direction of fire investigation, being a significant improvement to the 91 arrests of the previous year. However, there is criticism in regard to this result because most of these arrests are not based on concrete evidence and do not result in convictions in court.



Photos 1 and 2. Burned houses in Avra, Marathon, Attica (5 August 2013) and in Varimpompi, Attica, (5 August 2013)

In spite of the generally good results, the fire season was characterized by some significant fires. Among them a fire that burned 400 ha of the beautiful, historic and highly productive olive grove near the city of Amfissa in central Greece on 5 July 2013, was one of the most damaging in regard to agricultural production (approximately 50,000 olive trees were affected). On the other hand, fires in wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas caused a disproportionately large sensation and significant damages to property. Examples are three WUI fires in Attica, a short distance from Athens that caused serious concern to people and damages to homes. They were the fire of Herovouni, Porto Rafti, on 2 August 2013, and the fires of Avra, Marathon and of Varimpompi on 5 August 2013 (Photos 1 and 2).

This latter result leads to the conclusion that WUI areas cannot be adequately protected even when things are in general under control, let alone when the situation gets out hand as it happened in the disastrous fire season of 2007 (Xanthopoulos 2008). Accordingly, it is absolutely necessary to make the population in such areas aware of the fact that they need to take the initiative to protect their personal property and their communities by preparing their place in advance, learning how to prevent fire starts and how to react in case of fire.

IFFN contribution by

Gavriil Xanthopoulos
Hellenic Agricultural Organization DEMETER
Institute of Mediterranean Forest Ecosystems
Athens, Greece

Reference

Xanthopoulos, G. 2008. Forest Fires in Greece 2007. Int. Forest Fire News No. 42, 2-17.