



## 8<sup>th</sup> International Wildland Fire Conference

### Global Wildland Fire Network – Statement of the Mediterranean Region

16 May 2023

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#### ***Introductory remarks***

Wildland fires – nowadays referred to as landscape fires – have historically been present in many Mediterranean ecosystems. They often started from lightning and had a natural role, but, given the intense long-term presence of humans in the Mediterranean region, with its favorable climate, and the secular use of fire as a tool for land management, the vast majority of landscape fires are human-caused. The resulting fire frequency due to anthropic action is much higher than the natural one, resulting in serious negative impacts on natural and cultural landscapes.

The strategic management of landscape fires continues to be tackled piecemeal, with an emphasis on fire suppression and with disappointing results so far. All across the Mediterranean there have been serious disasters in the last few years, in spite of huge investments in equipment and technology, with the fire suppression organizations referring to climate change as the main culprit. However, there is a growing realization, clearly explained by the scientific community, that the question is much more complex and that there is a need for a common framework for action at national, regional and international level that will allow to integrate all public and private actors with varying degrees of responsibility on this subject. A set of common objectives that consider the complexity of landscape fire management must be established and a set of strategic guidelines and a global framework need to be defined, that will establish major shared and aligned lines of work, identifying the main relevant stakeholders in society and working with them with an all-inclusive approach.

#### ***Specific landscape fire problems of the region***

The loss of forestry ecosystems and natural, culture and economic values due to recurring, intense wildfires runs against the interests of their social role as a source of resources, environmental services and livelihoods. These functions are considered of great importance in major international strategic policies including bioeconomy, climate change and forestry. Preserving and protecting these values requires a coordinated vision of landscape fires and an alignment of objectives because, particularly due to their recurrence and their extension, they are one of the main factors degrading ecosystems.

The main challenges related to landscape fire management within the Region that require continuing with current efforts but also putting in place new actions, are the following:

1. **Landscape fires are a crosscutting issue requiring a multi-sectoral approach.** Landscapes fires cannot longer be seen as only a forestry or environmental matter, and even less just as a civil protection emergency. The question is much wider, and needs the understanding, convergence and commitment of several different policies such as forestry, rural development, land-use planning, agriculture, education, civil protection, environment and tourism. Multi-sectoral action plans should be produced to ensure integration of different relevant policies. *A major effort in coordinating sectorial policies efforts with innovative approaches and tools is needed.*
2. **Global Change (climate + socio-economic change) leads to increasing risks and greater intensity of wildfires** and is expected to induce the occurrence of multi-emergencies affecting citizens' safety, as these disasters are increasingly complex, dangerous and difficult to manage. Situations in which local or national capacity is exceeded by such events have already happened in the last few years and are more than likely to happen again. Strengthening of response



mechanisms further should not be seen as the only solution. Cooperation of all relevant entities within each country and helping each other effectively at international level, before, during and after such events is key not only to successful mitigation but also to achieving efficiency. To support countries to help each other more effectively, all firefighting resources capabilities and characteristics should be standardized and shared under a common system. *Better coordination and preparedness of suppression agencies involved, as well as of the population is needed.*

3. **Depopulation gives rise to a transformation of the landscape that makes it more likely to propagate fire.** This fact is closely linked to the abandonment of traditional land use, and the lack of use of forest resources, that is characterized by increased fuel loading and horizontal and vertical continuity. *Greater attention to smart, firewise rural development and promotion of the use of forest resources through sustainable forest management is needed to maintain resistant and resilience landscapes.*
4. **Wildfires' threat to civil society, both for people and for goods and infrastructure, is increasing.** The threat to wildland urban interface (WUI) areas is the main but not the only example. Avoidance of damages and fatalities should be the main objective, in a well-coordinated way to ensure at the same time the effective suppression of the fire. *Risk reduction for the most vulnerable is a priority, including education and awareness of the population to engage them as co-responsible actors in wildfire prevention.*
5. **Public investments allocated to landscape fire management should increase,** given the rising threat, but at the same time, they should be better balanced between prevention and suppression to ensure efficacy. Since fire suppression costs are very high, prevention-related activities should be given priority. Innovative, effective and applicable prevention methods should be shared with all countries and integrated into long-term policies. *Wildfire prevention policies and related preparation actions should be considered as top national public policies requiring a political long-term commitment covering several sectors.*

### ***Main advances achieved since the last International Wildland Fire Conference: Actions taken between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Conferences***

Since the 7<sup>th</sup> Wildland Fire Conference, the Mediterranean region has been very active, although there were limitations due to COVID-19 in this period. Three levels of actions are presented:

#### Regional meetings

Through regional regular meetings, specific workshops and side events in different scenarios, fire management challenges have been highlighted and fruitful discussions have been taken place among all stakeholders involved. Some examples are the following ones:

- International Congress Fire in the Earth System (2020, Spain)
- Numerical Wildfire (2021, France)
- Session Strengthening Governance in Landscape Fire Management – European Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction (2021, Portugal)
- International Congress Fire in the Earth System (2021, Spain)
- Fire Ecology across Boundaries: Connecting Science and Management (2021, 2022, Italy)
- Side event on Resilient Landscapes, Safe Communities: Innovative Practices for Integrated Fire Management in the Mediterranean. VII Mediterranean forest week (2022, Turkey)
- IX International Conference on Forest Fire Research & 17th International Wildland Fire Safety Summit (2022, Portugal)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Fire Behavior and Risk (2022, Italy)
- Joint Workshop (FAO-Forest Europe): Develop, adopt and transfer innovative solutions and actions to prevent and control wildfires (2022, Turkey)
- EFI Mediterranean Network Forum (2022, Spain)



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- Aerial Firefighting Europe (2022 France, 2023 Greece)
- Annual meetings of the European Commission's Expert Group on Forest Fires (2020, 2021, 2022, virtual)

#### Regional exercises

As wildfires ignore national borders and since many neighbouring countries are facing wildfire problems for the first time, Mediterranean countries have shared their knowledge and expertise in several exercises where interoperability and coordination have been tested as preparedness for real wildfire emergencies.

One of these exercises, in the frame of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), took place to train and test interoperability of resources from different countries in the EU MODEX León (2022, Spain).

#### Transfer of knowledge and experience within and beyond the Mediterranean

Both in the context of **advisory and response missions**, Mediterranean countries have expressed their solidarity with other countries, even during periods of high fire risk. In advisory missions, wildfire prevention strategies and analysis of new wildfire scenarios have been in the centre of this transfer of knowledge and expertise. Regarding response solidarity, last wildfire seasons, mainly 2021 and 2022, have reached record numbers in terms of surface affected in the Region but also in others. Despite of this complex situation, Mediterranean countries have always found the way to support those requesting for help.

Main international missions, involving experts and modules from many different European and Mediterranean countries have taken place within the European continent but also beyond: Australia (2020), Guatemala (2021), AFAN Project (2021-2022), Brazil (2022), Argentina (2022), Dominican Republic (2022-2023) and Chile (2023).

**A special case of international transfer of knowledge** occurred in Greece, following the catastrophic WUI fire in East Attica, near Athens, on 23 July 2018, with 100 fatalities. The government of Greece appointed an Independent Committee of fire experts, chaired by the head of the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC), to analyse the deeper roots of the wildfire problem in the country and to propose solutions. The core members of the Committee, consisting of renowned Greek scientists, reviewed the history and the situation in Greece, examined the experience and organization in other Mediterranean countries, with special emphasis on the changes that occurred in Portugal after the fatal wildfires of 2017, and produced a comprehensive report in February 2019. **The report called for integrated fire management, strengthening of prevention, better organization of suppression and cooperation of all relevant agencies.** Unfortunately, measures were not taken into consideration until the disastrous fire season of 2021, brought them back to the centre of attention. The Committee was called to contribute to the efforts to protect and rehabilitate the north part of Evia island which experienced the largest-ever wildfire in Greece (50,000 ha). Furthermore, parts of the proposals in the 2019 report started being implemented, but in a piecemeal approach. Examples are the legalization of the use of fire in firefighting, the reintroduction of specialized units for forest firefighting that can be transported by helicopters, the increase of funding for fire prevention mainly in the form of fuel management projects, etc.

**Another international relevant activity within the Region is the “Pyrolife” project, an EU-funded Marie-Curie Action, part of the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Program**, aimed to support the training of 15 PhD students across the globe to pursue cross-disciplinary, wildfire-focused projects. One of the main stated objectives of the project was to take advantage of Southern European leadership in fire expertise to understand and predict wildfires in Northern Europe. There were many activities in this direction along the duration of the project, which is now close to completion.



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### ***Conclusions and recommendations***

Since the last Regional Statement and taking into consideration the already current complex situation we are facing and foreseeing, among all the different steps needed, there are several lines of action identified to be a priority in the Region:

- **Governance.** Identification and compromise of all stakeholders and sectorial policies and responsibilities to ensure that objectives, policies and actions are aligned and consider all possible aspects. Development and systematic implementation of integrated procedures to inter-connect and conciliate different interests. Wildfire prevention as a transversal aspect in sectorial planning policies.
- **Forestry and rural development.** Adaptive and aligned forest management and rural development policies for resilient and resistant landscapes. Develop of accurate and updated fuel maps, including all fuel components are needed as a basis to plan fire resilient and resistant landscapes fires. Identification of priority areas for action, based on risk analysis and scientific evidence. Consider restoration actions as the real opportunity to create wildfire-resilient landscapes of the future that will reduce the impact of wildfires at environmental, social and economic level.
- **Communication.** Accurate information and education on the role of fire in ecosystems, its use as a traditional tool for landscape management and fire prevention. Achieve society risk awareness to engage in creating a better prepared population that knows how to live with fire. Elaboration of national strategies that include specific actions for different target audiences (school, rural and urban populations, tourism).