

Inside Climate News

Justice

The Fires that Raged on this Greek Island are out. Now Northern Evia Faces a Long Road to Recovery

The flames, fueled by the worst heatwave in 30 years, devoured a third of the island's pine forests and olive groves. Residents worry about their livelihoods, and many blame the Greek government.

By Moira Lavelle

26 September 2021

EVIA ISLAND, Greece—From the backyard of their house in the northern part of Greece's Evia Island, Vasiliki and Ioannis Tertipis used to look out on pine forest that stretched from the mountains down to the Aegean Sea. Now all they see is charred remains, the acres of pine and olive trees they own in ruin.

The fires in northern Evia started in August and raged for 10 days, burning hundreds of thousands of acres. And although the flames have now been extinguished, in many ways the Tertipis' problems have just begun. If they plant new olive trees, it will take at least five years before the trees become productive. And pine trees need to grow for at least 20 years before the resin can be collected.

The couple worry about their financial stability in the coming years, and they blame the Greek government for the destruction spread out before them.

"They have destroyed us," Vasiliki Tertipis said.

Fires are not uncommon in the pine forests on the island, but this year, during Greece's [worst heat wave](#) in 30 years, they swelled to massive proportions. Despite low winds, flames wound their way up and down mountains and around villages. The island lost one third of its forests in under two weeks, as a [total](#) of 508,000 acres of land burned. The pine and olive trees that grew between the villages were reduced to blackened shells, and those not completely torched bear leaves that have been baked to a dry terracotta color.

Now the whole of northern Evia must find a path to recovery. It's not just that the burnt trees need to be cleaned and the fields re-seeded. It's that everyone who lives there must figure out how they will survive—their way of life is in danger of disappearing with the smoke. The Greek government has said that the fires were evidence that the "climate crisis is here," and has promised a speedy revival for the island. But trust is low. The region's residents say that their struggles are not simply a matter of a warming climate but a confluence of the heat with government negligence and malfeasance.

‘We Are Only Protected by God’

Even before the fires were fully suppressed, Greece’s government was facing intense criticism for its handling of the situation. The government prioritized evacuations over the preservation of land. This was successful, in part: On Evia, only two fire-related deaths were reported. But according to multiple [reports](#), the government’s decision left firefighters without permission to fight the flames when lives weren’t explicitly in danger.

On top of this, the Greek fire department has been defunded for years, partially as a result of EU-imposed austerity, leaving it greatly understaffed and with aging equipment. Nikos Hardalias, then Greece’s Undersecretary of Citizen protection, [conceded](#) in August that only 20 of the country’s 73 firefighting aircraft were operable at the time of the fire.



SOURCES: National Observatory of Athens/meteo.gr; ESRI

PAUL HORN / Inside Climate News

Experts also say Greece’s handling of the fires suffered from the country’s unwieldy bureaucracy. In 2018, the Greek government called for a special independent commission to analyze why fires spread and how to prevent them, after a blaze in the seaside town of Mati left 102 dead. The conclusions of the commission, known as the [Goldammer Report](#), included recommendations that Greece streamline its fire-fighting bureaucracy such that there was a clear chain of command, and combine its fire prevention and suppression agencies, which had been separated since the late 1990s. The report said the separation left fire-fighting agencies unable to respond agilely and effectively.

In the weeks since the fires on Evia, Greece’s government has scrambled to address issues raised by the blazes and to prepare better for a hotter future. “I fully understand the pain of our fellow citizens who saw their homes or property burned,” [said](#) Kyriakos Mitsotakis,

Greece's Prime Minister, in a public address. "Any failures will be identified. And responsibility will be assigned wherever necessary."

Mitsotakis directly responded to the criticism of his handling of the fires on [Twitter](#), writing: "Unfortunately we are hearing comments about the Fire Brigade, very unfair to the people who were fighting on the field. However, the Fire Brigade controlled the vast majority of fires at their start. The fires of which we hear nothing, are those that were extinguished in the beginning."

Yet stories of absent or ineffective firefighters and minimal state response are [echoed](#) in most of the villages of Northern Evia. Ioannis Tertipis described firefighters arriving at his village of Agia Anna without water. On the other side of the same village, Vaggelis Anastasiou, 62, said he watched the fires spread around the mountain for more than 26 hours. At one point, he said, a fire-fighting helicopter arrived and he felt hopeful, only to watch the helicopter circle, disperse water and leave. "We were only protected by God," Anastasiou said.

Instead, volunteer fire corps and locals defied evacuation orders and remained behind, fighting the fires with tree branches, garden hoses and any means they had to ferry water. In the village of Achladi, the fire department is now a blackened husk. The locals said the houses in the village that are still standing were protected by the residents of the homes themselves.

No Forest, No Work

Now that the fires are out, Evia faces a hard road. "It's not easy," said Anastasiou, in Agia Anna. "We have a difficult struggle ahead of us."

Northern Evia's economy was largely based on small-scale farming of animals, honey, olives and resin from the Aleppo Pines that covered most of the island. Resin production brought 5.5 million euros each year to north and central Evia.

"Now there is no forest, there is no work," said Vangelis Georgantzis, the president of the Union of Resin Producers in Evia. Georgantzis has worked as a resin producer for decades, but his trees also burned in the fires. He said hundreds of families who worked in resin production are now left with nothing.

"The difficulty is many people will not have work of course," said Antonis, 35, a resident of the village of Retsinolago in northern Evia, who declined to give his surname out of privacy concerns. "And the one brings the other—the people will not have money. They didn't have much before and now they will have even less. In a few years people will be hungry, they won't even be able to go to the grocer."



A goat carcass lies among dead trees after the fires of Northern Evia on Aug. 24, 2021. Credit: Moira Lavelle

Antonis works as a beekeeper. None of his beehives burned in the fires, but he doesn't know what impact the smoke has had on the bees, and he feels certain, he said, that in the winter he will lose half the insects because there are no plants for them to pollinate.

The Greek government promised swift and complete economic support for victims of the fires, with a 500 million euro relief package for the island, including individual compensation for those who lost homes or property. Those whose houses were completely destroyed were [promised](#) 20,000 euros, with lower amounts for houses that were only partially destroyed. Similarly, farmers with burned land over 50 acres were to receive compensation up to 4,000 euros, with less for those with smaller holdings. Residents of the island must apply for compensation through an online portal, and the government [announced](#) that by Sept. 3, a total of 21,499,658 euros were allocated to the first 4,270 citizens who submitted their applications.

But most Evia residents are dubious that this money will ever reach them, and certain that it will not be adequate when it does. Stelios Bitsolas, 83, lives on the outskirts of Agia Anna. The fire spared his home and his chicken coops but, he said, it burned every one of his 90 olive trees. According to the compensation plan, he should be entitled to at least 1000 euros. "I believe they won't give me a single drachma," he said, referring to the Greek currency that the euro replaced.

"It's not serious help from the state," said Andreas Agianakoulas, a young man from northern Evia who works in the western village of Limni. He said his family's fields burned, and the fire stopped just short of their house. "It's very little money," he said. "That which they give you cannot build a new house from scratch."

‘After These Days, There is a Grief’

The Greek government has also promised support for the environmental recovery of Evia, the most pressing part of which is flood prevention.

“What is a clear, present and imminent danger right now is soil erosion,” said Alexandros Dimitrakopoulos a Professor of Wildland Fire Science at Greece’s Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. These dangers are particularly elevated in areas like northern Evia—a terrain of mediterranean conifer forests with steep slopes. “When these areas are burned, with the first torrential rains of the autumn, all the soil becomes mud and the mud flows downwards creating problems of mudslides in residential areas,” said Dimitrakopoulos.

Dimitrakopoulos said there was still time to prevent these floods, as long as action was taken quickly. Costas Skrekas, Greece’s Minister of Environment and Energy, has said that flood prevention needed to be completed by the end of October in order to be effective.

Some of this work has already begun. In the northern village of Istiaia, crews and experts from the forestry department have [moved in](#) to begin assessing which trees need to be removed, and if and where river dams need to be created. But when the government enlisted private companies to begin clearing the roads, some locals objected. The Union of Resin Producers demanded that local workers be employed to carry out reconstruction efforts, saying that they have the know-how to properly prevent floods or aid with reforestation, and more importantly, are owed reparations by the government.

“The state is responsible for our catastrophe,” said Georgantzis, the president of the resin producers union. “The state has to take on compensation for these people, not the companies who have the intention to give money now and build huge things like wind turbines in our space.”

The Greek government [agreed](#) to employ locals in northern Evia for flood prevention and restoration works, but negotiations are ongoing. The government has simultaneously designated private companies as rehabilitation contractors for the area.

Generally, Prime Minister Mitsotakis has focused on private investment as a path to recovery, announcing a new strategy to develop Evia’s tourism sector, and a plan to allow private companies to adopt certain parts of the burned forest. On Sept. 21 the Greek parliament [passed](#) legislation that makes it easier for local governors to assign this reconstruction work to private contractors.

In Northern Evia there is widespread concern about these companies coming in, and particularly about wind turbine companies.

“It would be like an attack,” said Anastasiou, of the construction of wind turbines in the area. “I am a fan of green energy,” he said. But he added he was concerned that the wind turbines would bring in big companies to the rural communities, and that the noise from the turbines would harm the livestock and wild animals.

Greece’s government has made moves to address the anger and desperation the fires left in their wake. At the end of August, Mitsotakis reshuffled his cabinet, replacing the minister of civil protection and [creating](#) a natural disaster recovery committee. At the end of September the country announced the creation of a new position: climate crisis and civil protection minister.

The country has [discussed](#) naming heat waves like storms, to raise awareness of the danger. In July, before the fires, Athens became the second metropolitan area—Miami-Dade County in Florida was the first—to [name a chief heat officer](#), charged with combating impacts of climate change. And the forest services were [brought](#) under the ministry of environment, addressing some of the organizational recommendations of the Goldammer report.

Dimitrakopoulos, the professor of Wildland Fire Science, was one of the authors of the Goldammer report and saw the reorganization as a step in the right direction. “It’s too late for this year that’s for sure,” He said. “It’s too late for 2007 when half of the Peloponnese was burned and 67 people died. It’s too late for Mati in 2018 where 102 people died. But hopefully it will not be too late for the years to come.”

In addition, Dimitrakopoulos said, the mapping of Greece’s forests was necessary to prevent and suppress future catastrophes. Greece is the only European country [without](#) a proper land registry, he noted.

Yet some remain skeptical. Demetres Karavellas, the Director General of WWF Greece, said that the group has been suggesting organizational changes similar to those in the Goldammer report since 1998, but that actual changes have been slow to come. “What we really haven’t been successful at all these years, all governments I would say, is really learning lessons from the failures of the past,” said Karavellas. “The decision to put the Forestry Services under the Ministry of Environment looks like the right decision, it’s what we’d been asking for for a long time,” he said. “But will they be supported financially? Will there be more people hired?”

He added, “We need to study this also in the operational sense.”

Greece will have forest fires next year and the year after, as the globe continues to heat up. The country will need to find a way forward, and to prevent further catastrophes like this year’s. Locals in Evia hope they will not be forgotten in the aftermath.

“After these days there is a grief,” said Agianakoulas. But, he said, “It is sure we need to gather ourselves and do what we can. I believe the people will do it. Just as we did with the fires, where the people put them out alone.”

Many have already started. The Resin Producers Union organized a large [demonstration](#) in the weeks after the fire. Locals from over a dozen villages in northern Evia started a self-organized assembly. Smaller groups have started mutual-aid distributions and organized social events.

“We want to be here with our kids,” said Glosiotis. “But we don’t know, maybe in three years nobody is here of all the friends we have. We don’t know what will happen.”