

342,000 acres turned to ash in seven days and counting - "Police logic" does not put out fires

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The perennial, inherent weaknesses of **forest firefighting** and **forest** management in our country are highlighted by the **fire** that has been burning for seven days in **Rhodes** . Any positive steps in recent years, such as the move of the forestry services to the **Ministry of the Environment** , are being made piecemeal and at a slow pace, while the fire fighting by the **Fire Department** is proving to be ineffective.

Yannis **Mitsopoulos** , assistant professor of Forestry at AUTH and director general of the Natural Environment Agency (OFYPEKA), was a member of the **Goldamer group**, which after the fire in Mati submitted an overall conclusion on forest management and fire response in Greece. "Greece has, in proportion to population and area, the largest firefighting fleet in the world. We don't miss firefighters. The case is still lagging in organization and planning," he estimates. "Fires must be dealt with in the first half hour. I remember in 1997 in Kassandra, Halkidiki, there were 187 incidents, but no more than 5,000 acres were burned, because "they caught up". A year later, half of the second "leg" was burned with only two

incidents. No matter how many airplanes you have, no matter how many fire engines you have, if the fire gets big it will stop only after it burns everything."



Fires: A settlement in Karysto was evacuated - Battle in Rhodes and Corfu

The Goldamer conclusion

According to Mr. Mitsopoulos, the Goldamer report – drawn up after the [tragedy in Mati](#) – remains relevant. "Since 1998 we have been giving resources only to extinguishing. The forests were left, thickened. It is evident, as a result, that the doctrine must change. You cannot have ten agencies in charge in a country where there is a lack of cooperation culture. We need one service with one plan, not more firefighting planes." Regarding the Antinero program, with which for the first time after many years resources were given to the forest offices for prevention projects, Mr. Mitsopoulos believes that it is too early to evaluate. "What we know for sure is that the doctrine of 'people first and property second' does not work."



"Tell operations center I need backup, flames are approaching residential areas"

The opinion of the forester Giorgos Eftychidis is similar, also a member of the Goldamer committee. "It's a matter of politics. Each year the respective government announces and implements one more measure. One year the integration of the forest offices into the Ministry of Environment, the other year the forest commandos and so on. By implementing the Goldamer conclusion in installments, we will not get a result", he estimates. "In light of climate change, if we don't focus on forest management, if we don't provide a stable funding and come up with a ten-year plan, nothing is going to change. It's like having a building with a static problem and instead of looking at how to support it, you paint it, make its garden, change the sockets. "Police logic" in dealing with fires is ineffective."

"In Rhodes, everything that we foresters say is confirmed", says **Ilias Apostolidis**, co-founder of the engineering company "Yli", who coordinated the studies for the restoration of the forest in Evia (in the framework of the "Evia Meta" reconstruction program).



Climate crisis: Are we losing the battle?

"The Fire Department has failed. Once they catch 3 or 4 fires at once, it paralyzes. They sit on the street and look at the sky, when will the fire planes come. They go wherever they see fire without a plan, they don't go into the forest because they are afraid of getting burned, they drive people away from

everywhere, even those who can help. We had proposed on the occasion of **Evia** that the services visit the villages, record how many are elderly and how many are able to stay, make a fire zone, cut where they are told with chain saws. In Rhodes there are villages like Apollonas and Laerma, which know about forests, they know about fires. In Apollo they made a fireproof strip by themselves and saved their village."

According to Mr. Apostolidis, the mistakes of the Fire Service are many. "For the first three days the air in Rhodes was almost zero, the fire should have gone out. More than 145,000 acres have now burned. In the evening they had to work on the border of the areas where the fire has passed to separate the burned from the unburned. Instead, these points were left and rekindled."

Mr. Apostolidis believes that the debate on the organization of forest protection should be reopened. "It is no coincidence that we keep coming back to the Goldamer conclusion. I personally think the main problem is that the Fire Chiefs feel they will lose their primacy if they involve foresters in forest firefighting. But a balance must be found, all strengths must be utilized. At the same time, the forestry services must be strengthened with personnel and resources".



"Twelve hours of evacuation, a lifetime"

The burned area in Rhodes reached 145,000 acres yesterday . Of these, approximately 2,800 are within four Natura areas and a further 13,700 hectares are within two wildlife reserves. "A small part of the protected area on Mount Prophet Ilias and a seed-producing cluster in Stefanies Apollonon have been burned. We used it as a seed bank for reforestation with trachea pines, which is the typical beautiful tree of Rhodes", explains the director of Dodecanese Forests, **Kaiti Balatsouka**. "Also a piece that had burned again in 2008 has burned and was approaching a piece that had burned again in 2013. In these areas there will be no natural reforestation because the trees have not had time to have seed, artificial reforestation will be needed. It should be noted that the southern part of the island that is burning is the main habitat of the deer - a last count put them at 6,500."

In Rhodes this year (between March and May), for the first time in years, fire fighting operations were carried out by the forest service, as part of the **Antinero program** . "830 hectares of fire zones and 740 km of forest roads were cleared. Also, the roads of Monolithos - Kimisala and Kolymbia - Archipoli, which are forest roads in common use, were cleaned to a depth of 20 meters on both sides."

The numbers

116 thousand acres burned in the fire in Dervenochoria.

12 thousand acres in Loutraki.

39 thousand acres in the fire of Neos Kouvaras.

145 thousand acres until yesterday in Rhodes.

10 thousand acres until yesterday in Karystos.

20 thousand acres until yesterday in Corfu.