



for a living planet

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Press Statement

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Forest fires in the Mediterranean

Rome, Italy – As forest fires rage across Portugal, France, and Spain bringing losses to people and nature, WWF warns that the Mediterranean region will face the same catastrophe every year unless better fire prevention measures are in place.

Every year, the Mediterranean is struck by more than 50,000 fires which burn up to 800,000 hectares of forests - an area the size of Corsica. Ninety-five percent of the fires are deliberate or lit accidentally by people. However, a WWF study on forest fires in Spain shows that only 1 per cent of offenders are prosecuted for criminal offenses.

According to WWF, large-scale forest fires throughout the Mediterranean have increased dramatically during the last few decades, mainly due to development, land conversion, rural mismanagement and overexploitation of natural resources – the root causes of most fires. In addition, climate change is provoking longer summer droughts, and extreme weather events - such as periods of high temperatures, very dry air and very strong winds, along with sudden storms with heavy rainfall.

WWF reports show that forest fires are threatening critical areas in the Mediterranean. For example, in the Monchique and Caldeirao mountains in Portugal - amongst the 10 forest hotspots in the region identified by WWF - forest fires are destroying the habitats of the Iberian lynx, the Bonelli eagle, and many endemic plant species. Last summer's fires were the worst for Portugal in 25 years, destroying 400,000 hectares of vegetation, and damaging 2,500 houses and buildings at a cost of 1 billion Euros.

“Government response to forest fires tends to focus on suppression and on investing in expensive technological solutions rather than concentrating on the management of forests,” said Pedro Regato, Head of the WWF Mediterranean Programme Office’s Forest Programme. “Without investing in substantial preventive measures these solutions will only make the fires worse.”

WWF calls on governments to develop and implement strict prevention policies and funding mechanisms to address the root causes of forest fires. They must establish efficient fire-fighting systems, build capacity in rural areas for managing fires, and prosecute criminal offenders. Once the fires have died down, native fire tolerant tree species should be planted as part of efforts to restore the forest. In Italy, Portugal and Spain, WWF is establishing cork forests, which not only restore growth but also provide valuable income to local people.

For further information:

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information on WWF's work on forest fires:
http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/forests/problems/forest_fires.cfm
- The cork industry is vital for the Mediterranean, which supplies more than 99 per cent of the world's cork. Portugal, home to a third of the world's cork trees, is the biggest producer, and in some Portuguese villages, such as Luzianes, 80 per cent of people depend on cork for their income.
- For photo requests, contact Folke Wulf, E-mail: fwulf@wwfint.org
- For footage requests, contact World Images, E-mail: world.images@world-television.com