

Interview of Professor Johann G. Goldammer to “Naftemporiki”: What is already happening with fires, it will become worse

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By Michalis Psilos

“What is already happening with fires, it will become more problematic and worse,” Professor Johann G. Goldammer, director of the Global Fire Monitoring Center, hosted by the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry and Freiburg University in Germany, stressed in an exclusive interview to “Naftemporiki” and Michalis Psilos.

Professor Goldammer underlined that the climate crisis is here and is accelerating. “The situation does not lie, we are running into the climate crisis,” he said, adding that the designation of the climate ministry was the right decision.

Asked what the critical issues related to wildfires are, he replied:

“Social economic changes, abandonment of intensive agriculture, countries changing the landscape, overaging of villages, with young generations moving to cities are the main problems. This has resulted in the fact that all the biomass, which over millennia had been intensively used by agriculture and pastoralism, is now accumulating and available to be burned by wildfires, which are threatening the rural space with society living therein.”

The Professor also warned that the frequency and severity of fires will increase in the future.

“The frequency, the size and the severity of the fires will increase. When there is so much vegetation and organic matter, the fire is burning more severely, and the impact of the fire is more dangerous.”

The secondary consequences

He explained that the fire is burning deeper in the ground, and it is destroying layers of the ground. “This is what is happening in Greece. The secondary consequences are becoming more problematic – for instance in terms of landslides and erosion. And this is all leading to a chain of events that will become unavoidable if we do not address the problem at its roots.”

Moreover, he estimated that this trend will continue and become worse year by year in Greece.

“Burning material is also available in the suburbs of Athens and countless residential areas,” he said, adding that we have to do something about it.

Five years ago, after the tragedy in Mati, the then government of Mr. Tsipras had asked the Professor to set up the “Committee on Perspectives of Landscape Fire Management in Greece” and to develop propositions for a future policy and for action.

Asked what has happened since then and whether these propositions have been implemented, he said:

“What has happened is that with these propositions we addressed the necessity of restoring traditional and developing innovative methods of managing the natural and cultural landscapes of Greece and the tools and incentives to deal with the phenomenon. The rural space must become attractive for the young generation. That means if you look in the report, which is available online, the necessity of creating an independent institution is stressed. Under the cabinet or the prime minister, or perhaps a ministry which would have a role of not only coordinating but developing a landscape fire management plan and prioritizing prevention measures by sustainable land management.

He added that a way to do that is to look into the past to see how our ancestors dealt with the problem. Historically and still today, in some places of Greece and the Mediterranean basin we see overgrazing. But now it is the contrary in most places. There is no use of the biomass so now there is too much fire.

As he said “we have a term called prescribed grazing. To reduce the amount of burning material. To create forest fire protection corridors. This was also our proposal to Germany. In order to avoid the fires of getting big, you have to fragment the landscape. By creating corridors where there is less burning material and the firefighters can have easy access and can effectively operate to tackle the fires. And actually, to create such corridors.”

A “time bomb”

You may have the same debate as in the rest of Europe, the Professor said and added: Leaving dead wood in the forest for biodiversity reasons. Like carbon storage. This is true, and maybe necessary, but it is also a time bomb. Because when the weather is dry like now in Greece then it turns into a tragedy because the high loss of combustible material is turning into a trap and constitutes a big problem.”

He underlined that increasing fleets of airplanes or calling for European assistance is not the solution to the problem.

“This is not the solution. In Germany, we are trying to create a fire-resilient landscape. This cannot only be done by the state. We have the private forest owners and the responsibility of civil society. This cannot

be done from one day to the next or from one year to the next. It is a long process. It requires restructuring to deal with the vulnerability of landscape.”

He acknowledged the difficulties as in all European democracies, governments change. However, he stressed the importance of all the political parties working together and with a common goal. This is a big challenge and Greece is not alone, he stated. “It is facing the same problems as almost all the countries.”

“Protect your country, protect your house”

Asked to give one message to the Greek people, this would be to take responsibility.

“Protect your country, protect your house. Protect your field and forest by carefully removing all flammable material from the forest. And if you don’t know how to do it, then we can consult and contact the authorities. Manage your land. If you cannot do it alone and sometimes there is no need to do it alone. The whole neighborhood should work together.”

In the Netherlands or in Germany there are initiatives of citizens planning on how to protect the community or the village. The communities are becoming very concerned, and they are taking measures at the community level for reducing the amount of flammable materials.

Finally, he referred to the insurance companies, saying that in California, for example, the insurance companies do not insure a house that is pre-programmed to be burned down and this is understandable.



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