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‘It’s like a war’: Greece battles increase in summer wildfires

Prevention and suppression are crucial as climate change creates stronger heatwaves, say experts



The aftermath of a wildfire in Varympompi, a wealthy suburb in Athens, Greece. Photograph: Louiza Vradi/Reuters

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30 September 2021

The hills in the wealthy Athens suburb of Varympompi are lined with rows of burnt trees after fires ripped through the area last August. Some pines still showed flickering signs of life, the pale brown upper branches contrasting with their blackened trunks. Nearby wedding halls were reduced to burnt-out shells. The air still carries the smell of dust and ash.

Two local workers cleared burnt trees and debris from a 12 sq km (4.6 sq mile) area. “We will leave some of these, the ones that are in OK condition, in the hope that they’ll grow new trees,” said one, who gave his name only as Agilos, picking up a charred pine cone.

A seed from another tree fell on to his arm and he picked it up. “This is a good sign. It means that things will be renewed,” he said. “I just hope the trees have time to create more seeds before the next fire. If not, there will be no more pines.”

Preventing another summer of wildfires like this one is now the priority for experts and officials alike.

Forest fires are an annual occurrence in the Mediterranean, but climate change has caused stronger heatwaves and a longer, more intense, annual fire season. On average, 80% of the burned area across [Europe](#) occurs in the Mediterranean region, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

This summer was also one of the worst on record. [Wildfires](#) tore through the entire region, from Tunisia and Algeria in the south to Spain, Italy and Greece in the north. In southern Turkey and Greece, residents and tourists fled areas ablaze as authorities struggled to deploy firefighting planes to battle the worst affected areas. The fires caused at least 86 deaths, 69 of which occurred in Tunisia and Algeria.

Two decades' of data from the European Forest Fire Information Service (Effis), provides some grounds for hope. "We are seeing a decrease in the number of burnt areas, but that is because of an increase in firefighting units," said Jesús San-Miguel-Ayanz, a specialist in fire risk management and an Effis coordinator.



A firefighter responds to a wildfire in Varympompi, Athens, in August. Photograph: Giorgos Moutafis/Reuters

The problem, he said, was unusually hot and intense summers. "We still have peaks, which are dangerous, as we have critical fires that we didn't have in the past. We are talking about unprecedented fires that have never happened in this way before."

Effis data shows that in the past 20 years, fires across the Mediterranean have declined in number as countries have scaled up their firefighting capacity. But in parallel, climate breakdown is causing longer hotter, drier summers, meaning that when blazes do occur they are far more intense, move faster and are much harder to extinguish, in part because they present a deadly risk to firefighting ground teams.

Peak years where there have been multiple intense uncontrollable blazes are also becoming more frequent. "I've been monitoring fires in Europe since the year 2000, but the number of critical years has increased," said Ayanz.

This year is the second worst year ever for forest fires in the Mediterranean after 2017, [when 12m hectares of land burned](#) across Europe and 127 people died. Countries such as Greece refocused their fire response strategy to minimise the loss of human life when fires occur, but authorities across Europe have yet to figure out how to prevent deaths and protect the environment.

Preventing forest fires is as much about human action as it is about curbing climate change. “Ninety percent of all fires globally and 95% of fires in Europe are caused by humans,” said Ayanz. Prevention starts with teaching people that even littering can prove fatal, as rubbish can ignite, while cigarettes casually thrown from car windows or barbecues can easily spark fires that quickly get out of control.

Enter the volunteer fire brigade. “I think the solution to fires is simply to train volunteers,” said Spyros Politopoulos, a jocular 50-year-old who is one of Greece’s 2,200 volunteer firefighters, and who battled the blaze in Varympompi.

Politopoulos attributes his decision to enlist as a volunteer firefighter nine years ago to him being “an adrenaline junkie”. But as climate change increases the frequency and intensity of blazes, there will need to be more like him across the Mediterranean, especially in remote areas far from urban firefighting infrastructure. “Instead of criticising from my couch I decided to be part of my city,” he said. Now he does three shifts a month.

The solution, according to Politopoulos and his colleagues, is to expand the number of volunteer firefighters who can attend small blazes locally to prevent them from spreading.



Volunteer firefighters tackle a wildfire near Kamaria in Evia, Greece, in August. Photograph: Ayman Oghanna/Getty

Volunteers are an official component of firefighting units in most European countries, undergoing rigorous training in order to serve alongside their paid colleagues, and summers like this one often spark new recruits. The problem, said Politopoulos, is that volunteers often have to pay for their own equipment or rely on donations. “When you go to volunteer and your own government says you have to buy your own stuff, then we have a problem,” he said.

Long-term strategy also requires governments to look at how to prevent the accumulation of twigs, branches and other highly combustible biomass on the forest floor. Many places that

experience annual forest fires, like California, use a technique known as controlled burning which involves setting supervised blazes during winter to clear the forest of material that can easily burn out of control in summer.



'I will see the ghosts of the dead forest for a long time' – returning to Evia after the wildfires

Greece does not use controlled burning, and global warming has made the conditions for doing it riskier, even in winter. In addition, the pine trees that populate Greece's forests are an especially flammable species.

[A 2018 government inquiry](#) to investigate deadly fires in the coastal town of Mati found that Greece has spent far more on fire suppression than prevention, and called on the state to upgrade its fire prevention system. This included guidance on how the government should remove bureaucratic obstacles and allow different agencies to work together on clearing forests in winter to prevent fires. Yet little has changed, other than the [creation of a new minister](#) for the climate crisis and civil protection, appointed earlier this month in response to the destruction that occurred this summer.

“During the winter there were heavy rains, leaving many broken trees in the forest, and no one had it in their mind to clear them,” said Politopoulos, annoyed at the lack of strategy. “Fires are extinguished during winter,” he said. “It’s like a war. You should prepare during the down time, the winter, so that everyone is ready.”