

Spain firefighters gain upper hand over blaze near nature reserve

June 26 2017, by Cristina Quicler With Adrien Vicente In Madrid



A Guardia Civil officer battling a wildfire near Mazagon in southwestern Spain, which has forced more than 2,000 people to evacuate the area

Spanish firefighters on Monday beat back a wildfire which threatens a renowned national park that is home to endangered species and has forced the evacuation of over 2,000 people from homes, campsites and hotels.

"The weather is evolving as we predicted, winds are clearly more moderate than yesterday," said the official in charge of the environment with the regional government of Andalusia, Jose Fiscal Lopez.

"With all the prudence in the world, we are moderately optimistic," he added.

Over 600 firefighters, soldiers and volunteers supported by water-dropping airplanes were combating the wildfire on Monday at the Donana Natural Park in southwestern Spain near Huelva.

Strong winds and scorching heat complicated initial efforts to fight the blaze, which broke out Saturday near the town of Moguer.

The blaze comes a week after wildfires killed over 60 people in neighbouring Portugal.

There has been no official estimate regarding how much land has been burned but the WWF estimated it has so far affected about 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres).

"The area is an authentic powder keg for fires," the head of WWF Spain, Juan Carlos del Olmo, said in a statement.

The natural park is full of electrical wires, illegal mines with electrical installations surrounded by pine trees, and illegally built buildings, he added.

'Could not breathe'

The fire prompted the closure of several roads and the evacuation of some 2,100 people, including guests at camp sites and several hotels.

Hundreds of people spent the night in gyms or other municipal buildings.

"There was so much smoke that we could not breathe," Macarena Medina, who was forced to flee her home in the resort town of Mazagon, told private television Telecinco.

She said she returned to find her home "without a roof" and with all her belongings "under rubble".

Popular beach resort Matalascañas, located roughly 20 kilometres (14 miles) south of Moguer where the fire began, was completely cut off for a few hours because of the fire on Sunday.

Roads in the area reopened on Monday but remained under tight police control.

The fire has not yet hit the neighbouring Donana National Park, which has been a UNESCO world heritage site since 1994 and is well known for the extensive biodiversity of its dunes, wetlands and woods.

"A special effort was made during the night on the front which threatened the park the most," Fiscal Lopez told Spanish public television.

The [national park](#) is one of Spain's most important wildlife sanctuaries and a popular tourist attraction.

It is home to a variety of animals, including endangered species such as the Spanish imperial eagle and the Iberian lynx, a large cat found only in Spain and Portugal.

Endangered lynx death

Officials temporarily evacuated a lynx breeding centre on Sunday as a precaution.

A female Iberian lynx died at the Acebuche captive breeding centre on Saturday "due to stress" during its capture for evacuation, the centre said in a statement.

The other lynxes are "safe and sound", said the mayor of Moguer, Gustavo Cuellar. "Each lynx held in captivity is receiving detailed care."

Police were investigating the cause of the fire. The regional president of Andalusia, Susana Diaz, has said that "the human factor cannot be excluded".

She vowed on Monday not to allow "even one metre" of the destroyed land to be rezoned to allow building to take place.

"We will continue until the end to find out what happened," she added.

Spanish environment group Ecologistas en Accion warned that this type of wildfire will become more frequent with climate change and urged the government to make sure no environmental crime goes unpunished.

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