

Ecological disaster on Greek island as fire burns on

August 14 2019, by Angelos Tzortzinis



Over 200 firefighters have tried to control the blaze alongside water-bombing helicopters and 75 firetrucks

Firefighters on the Greek island of Evia were still battling Wednesday to contain a fire that has caused massive damage to a pristine mountain

wildlife habitat after threatening four communities.

"Things are going better, but we must not relax our vigilance," Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told reporters aboard a fire department bus.

The blaze burned for a second day in a ravine at the 550-hectare wildlife habitat of Agrilitsa, causing major damage to pine forests.

"It's a huge ecological disaster in a unique, untouched pine forest," said acting regional governor Costas Bakoyannis.

The fire that broke out in the early hours of Tuesday on Greece's second-largest island prompted the evacuation of three villages and threatened the town of Psachna during the night, officials said.

"From Psachna to Kontodespoti and Makrymalli everything has been burned down. It's fortunate that we do not have human victims," Thanassis Karakatzas, a deputy regional civil protection officer, told state agency ANA.

Over 200 firefighters were in action backed by 75 fire trucks, nine water-bombing helicopters and seven planes along a 12-kilometre (seven-mile) front, managing to avert damage to inhabited areas.

Power outages and water cuts



Greece has been hit by a spate of wildfires since the weekend

"We succeeded in protecting human lives and saving properties," said citizen's protection minister Michalis Chrisohoidis.

A firefighter suffered burns on Tuesday after trying to cross the fire on a motorbike, and three cars belonging to campers were burned, a local mayor said.

"We should be able to tackle the fire by the end of the day," Yiannis Razos, a local official, told Athens municipal radio.

The area faced power outages and water cuts on Wednesday, residents

said.

Two Italian water bombers arrived after Greece requested EU assistance, and were on standby, the fire department said. A third plane from Spain was due to arrive by evening.



The fire that broke out on Greece's second-largest island on Tuesday caused the evacuation of several villages

EU Humanitarian Commissioner Christos Stylianides called the mobilisation of Greek forces "exemplary".

"I think we will be able to limit the ecological losses...European

solidarity is tangible," Stylianides told reporters.

No injuries or respiratory problems that required hospitalisation were reported at the height of the emergency on Tuesday, Health Minister Vassilis Kikilias said in a tweet.

But three ambulances were stationed close to the area as a precaution.

Greece has been hit by a spate of wildfires since the weekend, fanned by gale-force winds and temperatures of 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit).



Over 100 people were killed in Greece's worst ever wildfires last year

The PM, who cancelled his summer vacation and returned to Athens on Tuesday, called for the EU to take action.

"Climate change is taking its toll on southern Europe and that is why it is imperative at European level to strengthen the EU rescue mechanism," Mitsotakis said.

He paid tribute to the fire crews coping with some 50 forest blazes daily on average.

"I am aware that our firefighters, particularly over the last five days, have given their all, they are without sleep and often without food," Mitsotakis said.

Other fires on Tuesday were contained on the island of Thassos, the central region of Viotia, and in the Peloponnese region.



The fire in Evia has caused major damage to the 550-hectare wildlife habitat of Agrilitsa

On Monday, a major forest fire threatening homes in Peania, an eastern suburb of Athens, was brought under control. At least two houses were burned and radio broadcast equipment was damaged on nearby Mount Ymittos but there were no reports of injuries.

On Sunday, a fire on the small island of Elafonissos, in the Peloponnese, was brought under control after a two-day battle.

Two more fires were doused on Saturday in Marathon, close to Mati, the coastal resort where 102 people died last year in Greece's worst fire

disaster.

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