

EU water bombers join battle against Greek island wildfire

August 15 2019, by John Hadoulis



The destructive fire broke out in the early hours of Tuesday on Greece's second-largest island, prompting the evacuation of four villages including Platana

Greece deployed Thursday nearly 400 firefighters backed by EU water bombers to battle a massive wildfire on the island of Evia, burning

through a pristine pine forest for a third day.

"The situation is better but the (mountain) terrain is very challenging," fire department spokesman Vassilis Vathrakogiannis told AFP.

"Tomorrow we'll know if the fire has been placed under partial control. And even if it is placed under control, we'll remain in the area for another two days," he said.

The fire-fighting force consists of nearly 100 vehicles, nine helicopters and 12 planes, including two from Italy and one from Spain.

The wildfire has caused inestimable damage to the local 550-hectare mountain wildlife sanctuary of Agrilitsa and surrounding pine forests.

"My shed was burned, there are no more trees for resin collection, so apart from my house, I have nothing left," a local resident told state TV ERT.

The EU's Copernicus emergency management service has calculated that at least 2,300 hectares (nearly 5,700 acres) have been lost to the fire.

Local community head Dimitris Yiannoutsos told web TV Open there was "total destruction" in the forest but admitted that with the fire still active, officials were "unable to fully estimate the extent of the damage."



Firefighters managed to contain the fire in a ravine near the village of Platana, backed by nearly 100 vehicles, nine helicopters and nine planes

The fire broke out in the early hours of Tuesday on Greece's second-largest island, prompting the evacuation of four villages including Platana.

EU Humanitarian Commissioner Christos Stylianides on Wednesday called the mobilisation of Greek forces "exemplary" after emergency crews managed to save inhabited areas.

A firefighter suffered burns on Tuesday after trying to cross the Evia fire on a motorbike, and at least four cars have been burned, state agency

ANA reported.

But no other injuries or respiratory problems that required hospitalisation have been reported.

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).

Two more fires broke out Thursday on the Ionian islands of Corfu and Zakynthos.



Local officials spoke of 'total destruction' of the forest with the fire still active

The fire department on Thursday said it had separately arrested on suspicion of arson two Greek men aged 52 and 58 in the Peloponnese.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who cancelled his summer vacation and returned to Athens on Tuesday, called for the European Union to further bolster fire assistance services.

Climate change 'taking toll'

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

He paid tribute to the fire crews coping with an average of 50 forest blazes daily.

"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.



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

On Monday, a major blaze 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.

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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