

More countries than ever hit by forest fires in 2018

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Today, the JRC published the 2018 edition of its Annual Report on Forest Fires in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. According to the report, wildfires destroyed nearly 178,000 hectares (ha) of forests

and land in the EU last year.

While this is less than one sixth of the area burnt in 2017, and less than the long-term average, more countries than ever before suffered from [large fires](#).

Tibor Navracsics, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, responsible for the Joint Research Centre, added: "Changing [weather conditions](#) associated with climate change increase the risk for forest fires globally. We need to respond and step up our efforts to make our forests more resilient to a warmer and drier climate. Evidence provided by the Joint Research Centre allows us to focus on the most effective ways to prevent wildfires, helping us protect our forests, which is key to preserve biodiversity and citizens' quality of life."

Key findings

The highest numbers of fires of 30 ha or larger were mapped by the European Forest Fire Information System in Italy (147 fires, 14 649 ha burned), Spain (104 fires, 12 793 ha burned), Portugal (86 fires, 37 357 ha burned), the UK (79 fires, 18 032 ha burned) and Sweden (74 fires, 21 605 ha burned) during last year.

- Sweden experienced the worst fire season in reporting history. The total burnt area of over 21 605 ha mapped in Sweden was registered as the second highest in the EU, an unusual position in the ranking for a northern country. Although Portugal was again the country with the highest burnt area, its total was a small fraction of the area lost to fire in 2017 and one of the lowest totals of the last 10 years.
- Vulnerable ecosystems of the Natura 2000 network, home to several endangered plant and animal species, lost 50 000 ha to fires, accounting for 36% of the total burnt area in 2018.

- Despite a smaller overall area burnt than in previous years, above average temperatures persisted in central and northern Europe for most of the summer. This created conditions that helped the ignition and spread of forest fires, causing high economic and environmental losses.
- In 2018, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism was activated five times to respond to forest fires in Europe: in Sweden, Greece, Latvia, and Portugal.

In total, 15 planes, 6 helicopters and over 400 firefighters were mobilised in the summer, with the European Union having funded €1.6 million in [transportation costs](#) to mobilise support to the affected countries.

Furthermore, over 139 Copernicus satellite maps on forest fires were produced on the request of Member States. In addition, the EU sent forest fire experts from across the EU to Portugal on a prevention and preparedness mission to help boost the country's capacity to deal with forest fires.

In March 2019, the EU upgraded the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and launched rescEU to improve the protection of citizens from disasters and the management of emerging risks in Europe and beyond.

The EU created a transition fleet of firefighting aircraft in the summer of 2019, and deployed it already twice to fight [forest fires](#) in Greece and Lebanon.

Additionally, in July, the European Commission called for stepping up EU action on deforestation and [forest](#) degradation in a Communication, and committed itself to further action, including the development of the European Forest Fire Information System into a tool for wildfire monitoring on a global scale.

The 2018 edition of the Annual Report on Forest Fires also notes that in 2019 the [fire](#) season started early, because of dry and windy conditions, with high temperatures.

Already by March this year, the number of fires was higher than the average for the whole year in the last decade, with numerous fires in mountain regions and critical fires in the Danube delta.

Background

The JRC report "Forest Fires in Europe, Middle East and North Africa 2018" provides a detailed analysis of wildfires in 2018, including country-specific reports. The report contains data coming from the Copernicus European Forest Fire Information System as well as data coming from 33 member countries of the Expert Group on Forest Fires.

More information: [ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publicatio ... nd-north-africa-2018](https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/forest-fires-in-europe-middle-east-and-north-africa-2018)

Provided by CORDIS

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