

Greek firefighters begin to control forest fire near Athens

May 23 2021, by Marina Rafenberg



More than 270 firefighters, backed by 16 aircraft and by the army, are fighting the blazes.

Greek firefighters said Sunday they were slowly bringing under control a major forest fire in a nature conservation area near Athens as the

government promised financial aid to those affected.

No injuries have been reported so far in Greece's first big [forest fire](#) of the summer, but around a dozen houses have been destroyed or damaged and villages and hamlets evacuated in what experts warned could be an ecological disaster.

"The fire is officially diminishing. It'll be a matter of hours before we can bringing it fully under control," a spokesman for the firefighters, Vassilis Vathrakogiannis, told Greek news agency ANA.

The fire, which broke out late Wednesday in the Geraneaia mountains some 90 kilometres (55 miles) west of the capital, is one of the biggest in the past 20 to 30 years, according to fire chief Stefanos Kolokouris.

More than 270 firefighters, backed by 16 aircraft and by the army, were fighting the blazes.

The scale of the damage, notably for farmers, will only be clear once the fire is completely under control, the civil protection agency has said.

Government ministers were due in the Gulf of Corinth area Sunday to assess with local officials the extent of the damage and discuss financial aid.

Some 54 percent of the dense and hitherto protected [pine forests](#) have been burnt, the leftist Avghi daily said. And 6.1 percent of the [mountain range](#) is part of the European Union's Natura 2000 network of nature conservation sites.



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'Ecological disaster'

The government said it will provide financial aid to those who have lost their homes, cattle or farmland as a result of the fire.

"Immediate financial aid of 600 euros (\$730) will be provided to cover initial needs, and up to 6,000 euros will be allocated for repair works after an initial assessment of the damages," said deputy interior minister, Stelios Petsas.

He also promised substantial work to prevent future flooding in the area.

Euthymios Lekkas, professor of environmental disaster management at the University of Athens, said the fires have burnt more than 55 square kilometres (21 square miles) of pine forest and other land, some of it agricultural.

"It's a huge [ecological disaster](#) that needs work to avoid landslides and terrible flooding in the autumn," he told ERT public television on Saturday.

Greece faces violent forest fires every summer, fanned by dry weather, [strong winds](#) and temperatures that often soar well above 30 C (86 F).

These may be of natural origin, or criminal, with a view to real estate speculation, or due to negligence.

In 2018, 102 people died in the coastal resort of Mati, near Athens, in Greece's worst-ever fire disaster.

According to daily Kathimerini, 179 fires were caused by negligence and 26 were deliberately set in 2020.

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