

Almost 100,000 hectares of forest burned in Greek fires

August 11 2021, by Gwenaëlle Souyri



Elderly people take shelter for the night on board a ferry at Pefki, on Evia.

Nearly 100,000 hectares of forestry and farmland have burned in less than two weeks in Greece in the worst wave of wildfires since 2007, the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) said Wednesday.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis described the 586 fires that ravaged several regions of Greece in just a few days as "a natural disaster of exceptional magnitude".

More than 93,600 hectares (231,000 acres) went up in smoke in just 14 days, fuelled by an extraordinary heatwave that struck at the beginning of August, according to AFP calculations based on EFFIS data from July 29 to August 11.

The average burn over the same period between 2008-2020 was 2,330 hectares.

"They are still very destructive today everywhere, and have a rare high level of intensity," according to Mark Parrington of Copernicus, the European Climate Change service, which includes EFFIS.

The symbolic threshold of 100,000 hectares burned in Greece is expected to be reached on Thursday or Friday, as fires continued to rage Wednesday in the Peloponnese in the west and the island of Evia in the east.

Evia, Greece's second biggest island, has borne the brunt of the fires, home to more than half the total area burned.

Its thick pine forests, still ablaze on Wednesday, have been largely reduced to ash in the northern part of the island.



A wildfire blazes in the village of Gouves on Evia island.

While fires were to be expected given the very dry conditions, nothing suggested their dreadful scale, said Charalampos Kontoes, director of the National Observatory in Athens.

"To some extent, fires were expected because of the very dry season," Kontoes told AFP. "But I can tell you that in Greece we never had such big fires. We have fires during hot seasons but not at that size."

Deadly 2007 fires

In all, a total of around 110,000 hectares have gone up in flames this

year as of August 11, with over 90 percent of the damage coming in the last two weeks alone. That's compared to an average of just over 9,000 hectares over the previous 12 years, according to the latest EFFIS figures.

"Our data shows that we didn't have such intense fires since August 2007," said Parrington.

More than 250,000 hectares of forests and olive groves were burnt in August 2007 in wildfires that killed 77 people.



Children pour water on a smouldering fire near the village of Kastri on Evia.

This year's fires came as Greece suffered its worst heatwave in three decades. For a week, temperatures reached 45 degrees Celsius in several parts of the country, and flirted with a stifling 43 degrees Celsius in the capital Athens.

Experts say there is a clear link between the heatwave and climate change. A draft UN assessment seen by AFP described the Mediterranean as a "climate change hotspot", saying increasing temperatures had lengthened [fire](#) seasons.

'Blisteringly clear' climate change links

"The links between climate and wildfire are blisteringly clear in Mediterranean Europe," said Matthew Jones, an expert in [climate change](#) at the University of East Anglia in eastern England.

"Since the 1980s, the annual number of days with extreme fire weather conditions has roughly doubled, dramatically increasing the risk of wildfires."

"A lot of agricultural area has also been destroyed," said the National Observatory's Kontoes, adding that this would have a devastating effect on the economy of communities impacted by the fires.

Wildfires in Greece



Map of Greece showing the major fires on the island of Evia.

The land will take "years to regenerate", he said.

The weather offers no immediate respite, according to Thomas Smith, Professor of Geography at the London School of Economics.

"Unfortunately, EFFIS forecasts suggest that forest fires will persist in Greece until there is significant rainfall—at least until August 17," Smith said.

"The wildfires will persist until there is some significant rainfall, and it is

likely that the situation might worsen before it gets better."

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