

# Greek ecosystems face increasing fire risk, experts say

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Volos, central Greece, has been one of the worst-hit areas.

Two weeks of sweltering heat and wildfires have confirmed fears that Greece's ecosystem is under increasing risk, experts say.

Some 50,000 hectares (123,500 acres) of forest and vegetation have been left scorched, according to estimates by the National Observatory of Athens.

This makes the month of July the worst in 13 years in terms of burned land, said Charalampos Kontoes, a research director at the observatory.

"It was a dry winter, and spring rains were not enough to maintain" moisture in the soil, Kontoes told AFP.

Civil protection minister Vassilis Kikilias this week said crews had battled more than 660 blazes this month, an average of 50 to 70 fires a day.

Businesses and farms on the tourist islands of Corfu and Rhodes, Greece's second-largest island of Evia and the countryside near Volos, central Greece, bore the brunt of the damage this year.

The Greek state association insuring farmers, ELGA, estimates that 50,000 [olive trees](#) and 2,500 animals and beehives have been destroyed on Rhodes.

In the Volos area, the organization said it had found "[significant losses](#)" in harvested grain and grapes, in addition to farm machinery and buildings.

Major losses in livestock have also hit, it added.

## **Repetitive fires**

Greece suffers forest fires every year. In 2007, they left 84 dead in the Peloponnese peninsula and Evia. In 2018, 103 people died in Mati, a seaside resort near Athens.

Three people died in Evia two years ago, and five so far this year.

"Repetitive fires endanger the ecosystem. The forests are transformed into agricultural-forest land, the brushwood into scrubland," said Nikos Bokaris, head of the Greek union of foresters.

"The landscape tends to change and resemble African landscapes," he added.

In Rhodes, where the fires broke out on July 18, a large part of the local fauna including the island's emblematic fallow deer was seriously affected, said Grigoris Dimitriadis, head of the local environmental protection association.

In addition, the European Union's climate observatory Copernicus on Wednesday said smoke emissions from wildfires in Greece had been the highest for this period of time in the last 21 years.

## **Prevention**

Kontoes noted that the mountains around in Athens go up in flames on average every six years.

This affects the ecosystem of one of the most densely populated cities in Europe, which houses more than a third of the Greek population of 10.5 million, he said.

Bokaris added that the situation is particularly problematic in the Greek capital as "there are few green spaces and concrete buildings create a closed thermal environment".

The Greek government, which blames the fires primarily on the climate crisis, is often accused of not doing enough to protect biodiversity and

prevent the fires.

"This year, prevention started a little late—but firebreaks or other [preventive measures](#) are not always a panacea when the [fire](#) takes on enormous dimensions," Bokaris said.

The forecaster said Greece in 2022 received 55 million euros (\$60 million) in European funds for fire prevention, followed by another 86 million this year.

His proposal is to let the burned land regenerate and prohibit the conversion of "burned forests into areas for cultivation or construction", as often happens.

"The [climate crisis](#) did not appear suddenly and cooperation between government, [local authorities](#) and volunteers is necessary to combat it," said Alexandra Messare of Greenpeace Greece.

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