

Committee: Council of the European Union (EU)

Issue: Combating Wildfires in Southern European Member States

Student Officer: Petros Salonikidis

Position: Deputy President

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Dear Delegates,

My name is Petros Salonikidis, and I am an 11th grade student at the German School of Thessaloniki. This year I have the utmost honor of serving as a Deputy President in the 5th DSTMUN Council of The European Union. First of all, I want to welcome you all in the 5th DSTMUN conference and congratulate you for your selection in this wonderful committee. During this three-day simulation we will all broaden our spiritual horizons and gain an unforgettable experience.

During this session, we will be debating upon a very crucial issue with a worrying impact upon our lives, namely: “Combating Wildfires in Southern European Member States”. The purpose of this study guide is to provide you with the most necessary and essential information on the topic, while helping you be active delegates and create draft resolutions. However, apart from this study guide, delegates are also strongly encouraged to conduct their own research on the topic as well.

As far as I am concerned, MUN is more than just an extracurricular activity, it has the power to influence your whole character. MUN taught me that even the smallest contribution, can have a great impact towards an issue our world faces today. In addition, it helped me to examine an issue critically and search for trustworthy and dependable sources.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. My email is: petros.salonikidis@gmail.com

I am looking forward to meeting and collaborating with you all while hoping for a fruitful and productive debate.

Best regards,

Petros Salonikidis

TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Every single one of us hears every year of wildfires, however have you ever thought why are they so catastrophic? Nowadays wildfires are a crucial issue that have hindered society's functioning and are putting human life in daily danger. Lately, in Southern Europe, there are a lot of cases in which huge wildfires have deforested entire forests. Unfortunately, the majority of them are caused by human activity, either accidentally or not. Therefore, a small act can lead to a huge disaster for nature.

Apart from human activity, climate change also has a catalytic role in this issue. For instance, the annual increase in temperature leads to a higher danger of wildfires. Through the evaporation of moisture from the ground, soil dries out and therefore the odds for a fire heighten. Moreover, the most interesting aspect of a wildfire is how it can spread so quickly and burn a huge area, as more than one factor is involved in this situation. The first one is the weather. Should it be windy, then the wildfire will logically spread faster. In addition, the topography plays a significant role. If there is a steep slope and the fire begins at the bottom of it, it will spread faster uphill, since hot air goes up, causing a huge fire.

It is obvious that this affects human life, since a lot of people are threatened. For instance, people are forced to abandon their personal property, should this be their home, their car etc, which most of the time is destroyed, thus facing financial problems afterwards. Ironically this can be considered as the favourable scenario, since the worst-case scenario is the risk of human life. Unfortunately, many people have been trapped inside, unable to escape quick enough. One of the wildfires that refers to this, is the one in Mati, Athens, Greece in 2018 where more than 103 people were killed while trying to escape from their homes, their cars or while they were trying to reach the nearby sea.

In addition, the wildfires in Italy between July and September 2021 may have not cost so many human lives, however they cost 5.6 billion Euros to the Italian government which can be intensified as a huge economic loss for the country. In this case the majority of the wildfires resulted from arson. This means that weather conditions or climate change affected this case very little. Criminals were the ones that started this fire because they wanted to harm the Italian government. However, it is said that most of the time arsonists are young people that are mentally retarded and cannot handle their anger. Therefore, they are guided and controlled by experienced criminals that want to benefit from an unstable government.

Taking everything into account, it is evident that the situation in Southern European member states cannot be overlooked. Therefore, it is mandatory the member states to find feasible solutions, in order to combat this issue. In the

following guide, the topic will be analysed in detail and some effective workable solutions that these states can include in their policies will be proposed.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Arson

“Arson is the wilful or malicious damage or destruction of property by means of fire or explosion.”¹

Drought

“Lack or insufficiency of rain for an extended period that causes a considerable hydrologic (water) imbalance and, consequently, water shortages, crop damage, streamflow reduction, and depletion of groundwater and soil moisture.”²

EUMED

An alliance of Southern European member states that discuss topics of common interest. Right now, there are 9 countries, therefore it is also referred to as EUMED9. The countries that are involved in this are: Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain.

Forest Degradation

“Forest degradation is a process in which the biological wealth of a forest area is permanently diminished by some factor or by a combination of factors.”³

Heatwave

“Period of prolonged abnormally high surface temperatures relative to those normally expected.”⁴

Photosynthesis

“During photosynthesis, plants take in carbon dioxide (CO₂) and water (H₂O) from the air and soil. Within the plant cell, the water is oxidized, meaning it loses electrons, while the carbon dioxide is reduced, meaning it gains electrons. This transforms the water into oxygen and the carbon dioxide into glucose”⁵

¹ “Arson”, Britannica Encyclopedia, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/arson>

² “Drought”, Britannica Encyclopedia, <https://www.britannica.com/science/drought>

³ “Forest Degradation”, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest_degradation

⁴ “Heatwave”, Britannica Encyclopedia, <https://www.britannica.com/science/heat-wave-meteorology>

⁵ “Photosynthesis”, Natural Geographic, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/photosynthesis>

Wildfire

“Uncontrolled fire in a forest, grassland, brushland, or land sown to crops.”⁶

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Causes

Many people tend to divide the causes of wildfires into two big categories. These are the natural causes and the human causes; thus it is vital we examine them individually.

Natural Causes

As only 10% of wildfires are caused by natural causes, this section is also respectively smaller than the next one. The most common natural cause is lightning. This means that the spark that the lightning strike produces strikes several trees or also power cables. Therefore, a wildfire is also possible. In addition, not as common as the aforementioned cause, is a volcano eruption. Hot magma is expelled out of a volcano in the form of lava and thus it can flow to the nearby forest areas. Last but not least, the most important natural cause which is currently on the top of the table is climate change. The rise of the global temperature has led to huge heatwaves. In fact, France has experienced its hottest May in 2022. Many countries like Spain, Portugal or Italy also experience high temperatures daily, with an average of 40 Degrees Celsius, as of July 2022. Portugal recorded the highest temperature of the current 2022 heatwave in Europe, reaching 47 Degrees Celsius. Consequently, these member states are quite sensitive to wildfires and many people expect one from day to day with some occurring already this summer.

Human Causes

The other 90% of wildfires are caused by humans, thus it is in our hands to decrease them. The leading cause here is arson. The arsonists intentionally start a fire in order to destroy personal property or land to make a use out of it. For instance the deforestation of an environmentally significant piece of land makes it available for buyers at a much lower price. Arsonists are usually only the executors and not the ones that benefit directly from the arson. Arsonists can be reduced through the education of the youth on the disastrous effects of wildfires.

⁶ “Wildfire”, Britannica Encyclopedia, <https://www.britannica.com/science/wildfire>

Furthermore, another cause of wildfires is smoking. Many people worldwide have acquired this habit, however, only the minority of them are careful with a cigarette bud after finishing it, properly putting it out and throwing it away. The majority of smokers act carelessly, they throw the cigarette away without extinguishing it beforehand. Unfortunately, even this small act of human carelessness can start a fire and burn huge areas while also threatening many human lives.

In addition, unattended campfires can also lead to a wildfire. It is vital that people going camping extinguish the campfires and combusted materials completely so as to reduce the chance of a fire. Moreover, due to the fact that rubbish covers huge areas most of the time, many try to minimise it. However, instead of dumping rubbish on the ground, which is proven to be a feasible way to get rid of it, they tend to burn it as it is a faster and cost-effective way. However, many of them are not aware of the dangers that lay behind this act. Debris and waste burn slowly which means that a wildfire can be started easier due to the high temperatures.

A rather not so often cause but also worth mentioning are the fireworks. A single spark can be disastrous for a huge forest area; therefore, it is vital to blast fireworks at right places, preferably away from forest areas and perhaps by a sea or a lake. Last but not least, machinery accidents should also be considered as a cause of wildfires. For instance, a huge car accident near a forest area, which includes a car explosion, can ignite a wildfire. Also, a machine operating near a huge forest area or near it can also be devastating.

Effects

To begin with, wildfires are disastrous. Wildfires destroy ecosystems. Therefore, many animals lose their natural habitat, and many rare plants are threatened with extinction. This means that, both the flora and the fauna are in high danger during a wildfire. Moreover, the air people breathe becomes of lower quality firstly because of the carbon dioxide fires emit and the lower levels of oxygen in the atmosphere, and secondly because plants are responsible for photosynthesis. Should plants be demolished, humans are exposed to more greenhouse gases. This leads to the rise of the temperature which means that the global warming effect and the climate change are accelerated. Since climate change is a cause of wildfires, the whole situation enters a vicious circle. Not to mention the fact that the carbon dioxide that is released through the wildfire pollutes the environment. In addition, the fires that take place in dry tropical forests, such as Los Alcornocales Natural Park in Spain, lead to forest degradation because the quality of specific forest features is diminished, like biodiversity or soil fertility.

As far as the economic losses are concerned, the state or the region must deposit an exorbitant amount of money, in order to encounter a fire that covers a large area. What is more, aeroplanes and helicopters are also to be deployed to combat the fire. Thus, the initial costs heightens.

A natural disaster is always explicitly linked to effects on humans. Every year many fatalities of firefighters and lifesavers are reported during the summer period in which wildfires appear the most. However, not only people's lives that try to stop a fire are threatened, but also of innocent people that live nearby. For instance, 2 people were reported to have died, and hundreds were injured during a large wildfire last year between late July and early August in Evia, Greece. Not to mention the fact that 125.000 hectares of land were destroyed. Thus, innocents got killed by natural phenomena and a whole ecosystem in Northern Evia was destroyed. Moreover, the dust and the smoke affect people with health problems and allergies the most. Most of the time they impair these people's health.

Evia, Greece, August 2021⁷ ⁸

One of the worst wildfires in recent history occurred last summer in Evia, Greece. The causes of this wildfire were both human and natural. The arsonists were the ones that started the fire, however climate change and in fact the increase of temperature was the one that ensured that the fire spread faster and easier. As far as the response of the government is concerned, they had already taken into account the loss to the deadliest fire in recent history, in Mati, Athens, Greece in 2018 and they tried to prioritise human lives this time than focusing on both personal property and human life because more than 100 of them were lost 4 years ago. Thus, Greece did not witness so many deaths this time, however thousands had to evacuate their homes as they were watching them getting destroyed. To add up to



⁷ Hassan, Jennifer. "Thousands Flee Greek Island Evia by Boat as 'Horror Movie' Wildfires Rage." The Washington Post, WP Company, 9 Aug. 2021,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/09/greece-wildfires-evia-residents-evacuate/>

⁸ Hassan, Jennifer. "Thousands Flee Greek Island Evia by Boat as 'Horror Movie' Wildfires Rage."

Washington Post, 9 Aug. 2021,

www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/09/greece-wildfires-evia-residents-evacuate.

this, 125.000 hectares of forest area was destroyed in Northern Evia. This last aspect was the one that haunts many and not the destruction of personal property because that forest area meant a lot to the residents of it both intrinsically and environmentally. The pain of those people can be perfectly described in the picture above in which this old woman feels devastated seeing her home being destroyed. The picture made the front cover in many magazines worldwide as well as the New York Times Best Photos of 2021 list, proving the extent of the wildfire issue, Of course, the public response was immediate, as people collected food, clothes and also small toys for the victims of this disastrous wildfire. The Greek government promised an initial payment of 150.000€ in funds for those people who have lost their homes. In addition, they are not to pay taxes for the following 3 years and they are to receive 70% compensation for further losses.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Greece

Greece is one of the leading countries suffering from wildfires every single year. July and August are the peak of the wildfires with the fire in 2021 in Evia being one of the most disastrous of the past decade since it destroyed 125.000 hectares of forest area. This lengthy period of hot dry weather results in many areas being extremely sensitive to heatwaves and therefore very easy to be burnt. Greece asked for help from other member states and Romania was one of the leading member states that provided help with personnel and equipment.

Italy

Between July and September 2021, huge wildfires occurred in Italy that demolished 50.000 hectares. They cost 5.6 billion euros which is a huge economic loss and caused 6 deaths. However, the most devastating part of this story is that the wildfires were caused by organised arson. France and Greece provided Italy with firefighting aeroplanes to combat this issue.

Spain

On July 17th, 2005, a wildfire killed 11 firefighters and destroyed 130km² of forest area which was caused by an improperly extinguished barbecue. In September 2016, another wildfire destroyed 800 hectares of forest area and additionally it was reported that it destroyed at least 20 homes. 3 years later, in June 2019 4.000 acres of forest area were burnt near Tarragona. Last but not least, two months later the Canary Islands also suffered of huge wildfires that destroyed a large area.

Portugal

Portugal's disasters first started in 2003 with wildfires that destroyed 10% of the forest area in the entire country. In addition, 18 people were killed. 14 years later, in June and October 2007 a series of catastrophic wildfires trapped and killed over 300 people. However, the disaster for Portugal was not yet over, as another wildfire near the city of Portimão in 2018 took place there, however it did not have such a huge impact.

European Environment Agency (EEA)

European Environment Agency (EEA) is an agency of the European Union (EU) which provides information on the environment. They provide countries with graphs and statistics, as well as data so that countries can analyse them and therefore prevent wildfires.

Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC)

ERCC is responsible for the activation of the EU Civil Protection mechanism. Basically, it coordinates every action of it and overviews whether the assistance is effective or not. ERCC is not directly connected with wildfires, but it has immediate response to every emergency that member states deal with.

BLOCS EXPECTED

Bloc 1

The first bloc consists of countries which are the most affected by wildfires in Southern Europe, like Italy, Greece, France, or Spain. Their goal is to discuss and find solutions on how to combat wildfires effectively. The main focus is on monitoring the forest regions, in order to act quickly, should a fire arise.

Bloc 2

In the second bloc, there are countries that are least affected by wildfires from the rest of Europe. They should find solutions on how to assist the Southern European member states financially and materially, such as but not limited to providing these regions with fire trucks and firefighting aircrafts, in order to prevent huge disasters in forests.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of event
October 2001	Establishment of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism
August 2009	Mediterranean Wildfires - a series of fires in France, Greece, Italy, Spain and Turkey caused 8 deaths and huge forest areas were burnt down
June 2017 and October 2017	Catastrophic wildfires, injured and killed over 300 people in Portugal
July 2018	The deadliest wildfire in recent history - over 100 deaths in Mati, Athens, Greece
August 2019	Wildfires burnt down huge forest areas in Canary island, Spain
Late July - Early August 2021	125.000 hectares were burnt in Evia, Greece
July 2021	Implementation of EU forest strategy for 2030
May - July 2022	Huge heat wave hits Southern Europe causing many wildfires

RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

EU Forest Strategy for 2030

The EU is to plant 3 billion additional trees by 2030, an action that does not only target areas that suffered from wildfires, but also in other regions. The goal of this strategy is to improve the quality and quantity of EU forests. In addition, it will also increase the forest area in the EU, mitigate climate change and draw everyone's attention to it, heighten the resilience of forests and their role in reversing biodiversity loss. However, this is a constructive measure to help with the aftermath of combating wildfires. Up to today (June 2022) nearly 4.5 million trees have been planted which is quite encouraging that this strategy will be implemented successfully.

Legislation on protecting the EU's forests against fire

This legislation exceeds Southern Europe member states and includes also there, however it is vital mention it in this context. The EU has made a number of measures to support forests. Several Directorates-General (DGs) are involved such as DG Environment, DG Agriculture and Rural Development, DG Regional Policy and DG Research and Innovation. The purpose of the DG Environment is to protect forest

areas against pollution but also against fires. DG Research and Innovation deals more with finding ways on how to monitor huge forest areas in Europe.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

EU's Civil Protection Mechanism

The EU's Civil Protection Mechanism seems to be a quite effective solution on combating many disasters, not only wildfires. The aforementioned mechanism can be activated whenever a state suffers from a disaster, in our case a fire, and cannot combat it on its own. Thus, every EU country assists the effort of a country either with personnel, water bombing planes, helicopters, or fire-fighting equipment. In 2017, the mechanism was activated 18 times for wildfires in Portugal, Italy, France, Montenegro, and Albania. All the countries received the much necessary help to combat the fires and therefore the goal of the mechanism was achieved. Moreover, in 2018 it was activated 5 times, 2 times for Sweden, and one for Portugal, Greece, and Latvia. Trustworthy and dependable data show that the EU's help included 15 airplanes, 6 helicopters, over 400 firefighters and 69 vehicles.

EU Copernicus Emergency Management Service

The EU Copernicus Emergency Management Service satellite assists the effort of the EU to combat wildfires. Statistically data show that 139 maps were used in 2018 so that member states can examine which areas and regions are the most affected by wildfires and to observe the intensity of a fire. EU set some goals for the 2019 forest fire season and all of them were achieved, such as but not limited to: the reinforcement of ERCC with a forest fire support team, the provision of data by the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) for each member state's national forest program, the extend use of the EU Copernicus Satellite to maps wildfires, field exercises for civil protection on forest fires.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Educate young people

Since the majority of wildfires are caused by human activity, it is vital to educate children still at school so that they can adopt a specific behaviour towards the environment. The goal here is to teach them to be responsible and not act like they do not care at all for the environment. Furthermore, the fire department of each region should organise special seminars in order to educate people that often visit forest areas how they should behave themselves there. This means how they should open a campfire safely, how to extinguish it afterwards, which devices they should not carry there etc.

Monitoring the forests with up-to date technology

Apart from the EU Copernicus Satellite, member states might use drones to monitor huge forest areas instead of airplanes or helicopters. Thus, the costs of combating wildfires will be lowered since the resources needed to power up-to-date technology is less than that needed for airplanes and helicopters and the whole procedure will be monitored more efficiently allowing many governments to implement this project for larger areas.

Encourage more organisations get involved

It is vital that more organisations get involved, not only the EU, but also organisations that strive for the protection of the environment, like Greenpeace. The EU can pledge money on its own, however Greenpeace fundraising programs and events will encourage the engagement of the public and raise awareness on combating wildfires. This means that the EU Forest Strategy for 2030 can be possibly extended on this level. Thus, the ecosystem that was damaged will be restored quicker than before.

State pledges money on the most affected people

The state should also be able to pledge more money for the people that are the most affected by this issue. Basically, the people that live near forest areas and their personal properties and belongings were damaged. Therefore, the state must assist them with the necessary help so that they can overcome this setback.

Creation of global framework

Encourage the creation of a global framework, in which people can pledge money for the testing of new devices and techniques that can help combat a wildfire more effectively and quickly. Scientists all across the globe can work collectively and research on it, in order to reduce noticeably wildfires in southern Europe.

Implementation of tree planting campaigns

Many countries that suffered from wildfires in the past years contain damaged ecosystems that need to be restored. This can be implemented by starting a campaign of planting trees in the most affected areas. Thus, the engagement of the public will help with a faster restoration of the ecosystems.

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