



ADDRESSING THE RISKS OF FOREST FIRES IN SEE ROADMAP

Based on the findings of the Regional Report on Forest Fires in South Eastern Europe

Introduction

Forests represent a common heritage and have important ecological, economic, social, aesthetic and cultural values. Forest fires are among the main threats to our forest resources and give rise to a wide range of devastating economic, social and ecological consequences. Although the issue is receiving increased attention, and although forest fire prevention is being tackled in the framework of climate change adaptation measures both regionally and internationally, the necessary political momentum is still lacking. Accordingly, policy and legal mechanisms still need to be put in place at national and regional level.

Under the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC), the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), with the support of Austrian Development Cooperation, is implementing a project aimed at identifying potential actions to combat this form of forest devastation in South Eastern Europe (SEE), as well as at enhancing dialogue and cooperation among SEE countries. One of the goals of the project is to identify concrete activities by which key actors can close the existing gaps in legislation, policy, implementation and enforcement in order to reduce or eliminate forest fires in SEE. The main outputs of this project are 1) national fact-finding assessments of the forestry regimes and forest fires prevention, mitigation and control, together with the basic assessment of the institutional, policy and legislative framework in the SEE region¹, 2) regional study with policy recommendations 3) closing workshop aiming to outline the next steps, embodied in this roadmap.

Main conclusions of the regional report

In recent years many of the relevant institutions in the countries of SEE have been restructured or annulled, and new institutions have been established. Some competencies have been transferred to other institutions, giving rise to governance inefficiencies and overlaps. Common to most of the countries is the overall lack of coordination between the various institutional and administrative frameworks. There is also a lack of reliable and aggregated data on forest fires (forest fire statistics) and lack of national early warning systems. Institutional capacities need further strengthening. There is a lack of well-established bilateral processes with neighbouring countries in the field of forest fire protection, and especially fire suppression (with respect to both dispatching and receiving assistance). Not enough joint actions are being implemented for the suppression of cross-border and internal forest fires. In all countries of the region, there is a clear lack of specialised equipment such as off-road vehicles, fire trucks and aerial firefighting aircrafts.

The main causes of forest fires in the region are agricultural burning, pastureland burning, negligence (along highways, railways, etc.) and arson. The rise in the incidence of arson as a reason for forest fires in the SEE region over the past decade is a cause for concern. The main motive for arson is economic, as arson attacks are generally connected to illegal logging. The Mediterranean and sub-Mediterranean types of forests, such as beech forests and large territories afforested with coniferous trees, are particularly prone to forest fires.

¹ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia

Roadmap

This roadmap focuses on strategic priority activities. The proposed priority activities have been developed based on the recommendations formulated in the Regional Report on Forest Fires. The current international and regional legal, policy and institutional frameworks contain all the essential components for dealing with forest fires. However, they still need to be improved in order to achieve greater efficiency in forest fire protection. In this context, efficiency does not refer only to efficient forest fire suppression, but also to efficient forest fire prevention. The activities required to achieve efficiency can be implemented at both national and international level.

1. *Internal coordination*

Consolidate and strengthen national institutions and capacities. Attention can then be given to national, transboundary and regional networking among agencies and ministries. Where needed, the legal framework should be clarified and responsibilities clearly assigned, taking special care to avoid overlaps.

2. *Transboundary coordination and cooperation*

Open transboundary coordination and cooperation channels. The exchange of information, best practices, and disaster management information flows are essential tools to collectively address the risks of forest fires and forest fires themselves. Consider creating a permanent regional mechanism to ensure such coordination and cooperation.

3. *Setting up early warning systems in the countries*

Create early warning systems where they don't exist yet. Early warning systems are key to prevent catastrophic forest fires that can also affect neighbouring countries and can have grave negative impact on local economies, ecosystems, air quality, soil quality and resilience to climate change.

4. *Strengthening and building capacities in the competent national authorities*

Develop training programmes on forest fire prevention and control. Emphasize forest fire management programs (prevention, preparedness and suppression) through training programmes on forest fire prevention and control, with a special attention to the transboundary aspects, to increase efficiency and capacity of the national authorities responsible for natural resource and forestry management. Special attention should also be given to the identification and reduction of the causes of forest fires as a part of forest fire prevention.

5. *Public participation, meetings and other events*

Include public participation in forest and forest fire management practices, both at the policy design and monitoring and implementation levels. Conferences, roundtables and other public events can be used to raise awareness and collect valuable inputs that reinforce citizens' engagement in forest governance.

6. *Development of a Regional Action Plan*

Develop and adopt a Regional Action Plan with a time bound set of goals and activities that should include all of the strategic points listed above and any other intermediate measures necessary to achieve them. The implementation of such a Regional Action Plan should include a monitoring mechanism and provisions for support services.

7. *Development of research programs*

Strengthen the existing national funds for scientific research connected with forest fire protection and seek to use the available international financial resources for regional scientific projects.