

# Managed forests, lower wildfire risks

Turning proven knowledge into operational practices

*CEPF position paper  
on integrated wildfire risk management*

## A. Context

Wildfires and wildfire risks are now a concern across the entire European Union. In the Mediterranean region, wildfires are becoming increasingly deadly, while in Central and Northern Europe, the occurrence and scale of large wildfires are increasing. Member States have different histories, exposure levels, management traditions, and preparedness capacities regarding wildfires. An EU approach to integrated wildfire risk management must therefore be unified in its ambition while remaining flexible in implementation, allowing measures to reflect regional realities.

Wildfire risk is expanding geographically and becoming less seasonal. To address this the focus must be on building less fire prone landscapes, reducing human-caused ignition, and ensuring sufficient and efficient reaction capacities. This requires recognising that active Sustainable Forest Management (SFM)<sup>1</sup> is not optional; it is the foundation of wildfire resilience.

Active SFM is a cornerstone of integrated wildfire risk management. It strengthens resilience by shaping forest structure and reducing fuel loads, through thinning dense stands, removing excess dead biomass, introducing mixed species, improving forest road access, safeguarding soils, and applying national prevention best practices. Creating young regeneration stands with low biomass and limited ladder fuels, particularly through strip or strip-and-group selection cutting, forms natural firebreaks that interrupt fire spread, slow crown fires, and enhance firefighter safety. Mosaic restoration further reduces fuels in patches, fostering heterogeneous and resilient landscapes. Productive or “green” firebreaks, including agroforestry mosaics, align wildfire risk reduction with bioeconomy objectives. When wildfires spread, the existence of well-maintained access infrastructure is essential to enable fast and appropriate response actions under safer conditions.

The principles of integrated wildfire risk management are widely known and documented. This is reflected in numerous national and EU policies, research initiatives<sup>2</sup>, and concrete instruments such as the Pan-European Forest Risk Facility<sup>3</sup>, the annual activation of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (rescEU<sup>4</sup>), as well as national and regional legislation and best practices (see annexes). The key EU challenge today is not the absence of policy frameworks or knowledge but to ensure that they translate into coherent and effective action in real practice on the ground.

In Europe, almost all ignitions of wildfires are due to either human negligence or intentional acts. Furthermore, wildfire risk continues to increase because what is recognised in theory to minimise it, active management, does not systematically translate into practice land management on the ground. Fire risk is generated long before ignition, through fuel accumulation and land abandonment. This is not a failure of

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<sup>1</sup> [Sustainable Forest Management](#) as defined by Resolution H1 of the Helsinki Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Recent research project on forest fire resilience financed by EU funds : [FIRE-RES](#), [FirEUrisks](#), [SILVANUS](#), [TREEADS](#)

<sup>3</sup> Pan-European Forest Risk Facility [FoRISK](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Decision 2019 on amending the Union Civil Protection Mechanism](#)



science or policy design, but a failure to make the integrated approach operational by enabling active SFM, which in certain regions is no longer economically or structurally.

Addressing this requires that prevention, preparedness, reactions and recovery become fully operational across all relevant policies. Where forests are actively managed, wildfire risk is lower; where active management disappears, risk accumulates.

## **B. Policy recommendations:**

### **1) Coherent support for active SFM as wildfire risk prevention across policies**

Wildfire risk management is unevenly understood and unevenly enabled across Europe, and support for active SFM is therefore often hampered by conflicting policy objectives. Investing in resilient ecosystems must be recognised as the primary prerequisite for achieving any climate, biodiversity, or resource security objectives.

Prevention, preparedness, and effective response reduce ecosystem degradation and secondary disturbances. Forests actively managed according to SFM are climate-adapted forests that protect biodiversity and rural resilience while safeguarding the EU's climate mitigation potential. As forests represent a significant share of EU net greenhouse gas removals, large-scale fires can quickly reverse these gains into substantial emissions. Active SFM and fuel management must therefore be recognised as critical resilience infrastructure to prevent such a downward spiral.

#### Pathways for EU actions

##### *a. Mainstream integrated wildfire risk management in all policies*

To ensure that no policy undermines wildfire resilience goals, all EU initiatives should systematically recognise integrated wildfire risk management (IWRM) as a fundamental prerequisite for climate resilience, biodiversity protection, rural viability, and public safety.

This requires recognising and managing trade-offs between wildfire resilience and other objectives. Short-term gains, such as biodiversity protection or carbon storage, must be weighed against long-term resilience, with careful choices needed for ecosystems that remain resilient to wildfire risks. The upcoming climate resilience framework should fully integrate these considerations

##### *b. Revision of existing policies hampering wildfire risk prevention*

Existing legal framework and policies that may hamper possibilities of active SFM (e.g. limitations of proactive management, fuel reduction, or transfer of forest reproductive materials, aiming for set-asides instead of encouraging to active management) or preparedness measures (e.g. creation and maintenance of forest roads and infrastructure for fast reactions) should be reviewed and accordingly revised.

Revised climate policies and especially the LULUCF Regulation should promote, instead of a continuous emphasis on static sink increasement that increase fuel in forests, a holistic approach integrating the forest-based value chain into climate policy. The narrative of constant sink increasement, focused solely on the accumulation of carbon in forest, is not anymore valid due to climate change. Thus, in forests, active management that results in well-managed, not too dense stands are needed.

In recent years, EU policies have not supported a balanced approach in favour of forest resilience improvement. Nature protection legislation, such as the Nature Restoration Regulation, and the Birds and Habitats Directives are promoting setting asides forests from the use and, should be revised and simplified to promote active SFM and less wildfire-prone ecosystems. Increased flexibility for regional adaptations that reflects different forest types, fire regimes and levels of experience is essential, as well as a long-term perspective on ecosystem resilience and risk factors increased for near-by areas close to protected areas.

Narrowly focused approaches centred on native species, increase deadwood, closer-to-nature forest management practices, or limitation of possibilities of fuel management are counterproductive for overall wildfire risk management. Landscape resilience has to be enabled, not restrained.

### *c. Determination on the relation between wildfire risk and protected areas*

In the EU, wildfires occur more frequently in protected areas than in non-protected areas<sup>5</sup>. Based on the latest Annual Fire Report from EFFIS<sup>6</sup>, 41% of total burned areas in the EU in 2023 were located in Natura2000 sites. While only 18,6% of EU territory was designed under this protection regime<sup>7</sup> in 2022.

The root causes behind this relation between higher wildfire risk and protected areas must be thoroughly investigated. EU, national, and regional protection regimes should then be adequately revised to address this situation and to decrease the risk.

## **2) Enable economically viable wildfire prevention and recovery**

Active SFM reduces fuel loads, improves access for firefighting, and strengthens ecosystem resilience to climate change. However, in many regions active management is declining, not because of lack of awareness, but because it is no longer economically or structurally viable. Weak forest value chains, lack of infrastructure, fragmented or unknown ownership, workforce shortages, regulatory uncertainty, and increased administrative burden from reporting all limit the ability to act.

Wildfire risk prevention requires active SFM. Active SFM requires appropriate and predictable financing. The means and options for financing will greatly vary from one region of the EU to the next. In some areas, a stable forest-based bioeconomy already supports continued management, including early thinning and other essential early interventions. In others, the absence of a self-sustaining and functioning forest-based value chain leads to a lack of active management.

Forest owners may also face a structural bioeconomy dilemma: tree species or systems that are better adapted to fire prevention and resilience often offer little or only very long-term and uncertain economic return, while more fire-prone systems remain the only ones providing short-term income. Furthermore, even tree species which are local and adapted to forest fires are significantly under pressures from changing climatic conditions, natural disasters, or pest and disease. Without viable economic alternatives, transitions towards more resilient forest landscapes remain unrealistic, regardless of policy ambition.

<sup>5</sup> Víctor Resco de Dios, Simon J. Schütze, Àngel Cunill Camprubí, Rodrigo Balaguer-Romano, Matthias M. Boer, Paulo M. Fernandes, *Protected areas as hotspots of wildfire activity in fire-prone Temperate and Mediterranean biomes*, Journal of Environmental Management, Volume 385, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2025.125669>.

<sup>6</sup> San-Miguel-Ayanz, J., Durrant, T., Boca, R., Maianti, P., Liberta, G., Jacome Felix Oom, D., Branco, A., De Rigo, D., Suarez-Moreno, M., Ferrari, D., Roglia, E., Scionti, N., Broglia, M., Onida, M., Tistan, A. and Loffler, P., *Forest Fires in Europe, Middle East and North Africa 2023*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024, doi:10.2760/8027062

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/indicators/terrestrial-protected-areas-in-europe>

## Pathways for EU actions

### *a. Strong forest-based bioeconomy all across Europe supported by public and private funding*

As part of the new EU Bioeconomy Strategy, support and investments to promote and develop locally suited forest-based bioeconomy value chains based on active SFM are required.

Across the EU, the availability of private finance for forest-based bioeconomy value chains varies widely. Where available, private investment in value chains that support active management and rural economic viability should be promoted and incentivised. Where unavailable, public finance should support their development and maintenance of forest -based bioeconomy.

Special attention is required to address small-scale ownership and the related small-scale assortments they provide. For this, appropriate support for cooperation among forest owners and their organisation, which provide advisory services and practical support on good forest management practices that strengthen forest resilience avoid forest fires, should be enhanced. In case of landscape approach to wildfire risk management, the implications on individuals' forest managements choices have to be duly supported and, in relevant case compensated for.

In the context of the on-going discussion on the futures MFF, CAP, NRP, and Competitiveness Fund, funding sources and opportunities in an unbureaucratic way is crucial. The long-term continuity and enhancement of the existing support mechanisms are essentials.

### *b. Insurance mechanisms*

Investments in preventive forest and landscape management, as resilience infrastructure, are essential and delivers benefits for society as a whole by safeguarding ecosystems, communities, and economic assets. This should be financially rewarded and treated accordingly within Europe's resilience framework.

This includes risk-based insurance schemes that reward mitigation efforts through premium differentiation, as well as the development of parametric insurance solutions enabling faster and more transparent compensation based on objective wildfire indicators. At the same time, more concrete opportunities for the wider uptake and expansion of forest insurance schemes across the EU should be developed, including extending coverage to larger forest areas, in order to reduce exposure in risk-prone regions and enable broader participation in risk-sharing mechanisms. Such instruments can help reduce exposure in high-risk areas while strengthening shared responsibility between landowners, insurers and public authorities.

### *c. Green finance and payment for ecosystem services*

Novel approaches for economically viable wildfire prevention can arise through the use of payments for ecosystems services (including carbon and nature credits). As such they should support to actively manage forests and contribute to self-sustaining bioeconomy value chains.

Nevertheless, it remains essentials that immediate funding opportunity are available as nature and carbon credits schemes still have many more year to develop and become fully operation.

Given the current emergency for actions, they should not be solely relied upon but be complement rather than hamper timber production and the broader multifunctionality of forests.

### 3) Preparedness and reaction through enhanced capacities and wildfire risk monitoring

Not all wildfires can be prevented, and with ongoing climate change some occurrences will be of catastrophic scale.

In this context, while national and regional authorities manage wildfire prevention, preparedness, response activities and recovery, the EU has been able to co-finance and coordinate additional support when needed. EU-level coordination adds value where cross-border, large-scale or resource-intensive responses are required.

Most notable EU actions are its joint rescEU firefighting fleet and the upcoming permanent rescEU fleet, the strategically pre-positioning firefighters from across Europe, the EC Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC), and the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS).

#### Pathways for EU actions

##### *a. Capacities and coordination of the RescEU fleet should be further enhanced*

While each of the intervention carried under the RescEU mechanism is highly valuable, even with a growing fleet of assets, effective coordination between the EU, Member States and local authorities remains crucial. Better real-time information sharing, joint training exercises, and interoperable communication systems would improve operational coherence, reduce delays, and optimise the use of available resources during cross-border responses.

##### *b. Options for improved wildfire risk monitoring should be explored*

The 2023's EC proposal for a forest monitoring law lacked a clear purpose. The absence of a sensible rationale and of any demonstrated way on how collected data would be used at EU level, have cast serious doubt on the necessity of such a proposal for a Regulation. Forest owners remain unconvinced by this proposal and have welcome the Commission announcement of its withdrawal in October 2025.

This being said, forest owners see that working on options to further strengthen EFFIS as a tool to support RescEU mechanism should be envisaged.

Improving existing wildfire risk assessment<sup>8</sup> and support Member States reaching early detection could adds significant value to strengthening rescEU by enabling more accurate anticipation of where, when and how wildfires are most likely to occur and escalate, which in turn enhances preparedness, resource allocation and strategic deployment of firefighting assets.

Such a process should be done in a truly collaborative and inclusive approach, with active engagement and support from of the European National Forest Inventory Network (ENFIN), National Forest Inventories, the FoRisk Facility and other relevant stakeholders' groups such as the EGFF.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://forest-fire.emergency.copernicus.eu/about-effis/technical-background/wildfire-risk-assessment>