

# Spain: Forest fire outbreaks worsened by budget cuts

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21 August 2012

Wildfires in Spain this summer have so far claimed the lives of nine people and laid waste 132,399 hectares (510 square miles) of land across Spain, three times more than last year according to Environment Ministry figures. It has been the worst season for fires in a decade, with more than 8,000 individual outbreaks so far, some of which have decimated national parks and nature reserves.

Recriminations have broken out between local authorities and the Popular Party (PP) government, with all blaming one other for exacerbating the destruction by imposing cuts to fire prevention and protection services and failing to respond quickly enough.

The latest fires on the island of La Gomera in the Canary Islands have destroyed 4,800 hectares (18 square miles), or over 10 percent of the island. Some 5,000 people fled from their homes—a quarter of the population—have been compelled to evacuate. The Garajonay National Park, a United Nations World Heritage site and home to hundreds of plant species, many unique, has been devastated. It could take up to 100 years for the destroyed areas to recover.

The fire on Gomera has raged for two weeks and could continue for weeks more. Seven seaplanes and six helicopters have been involved in dumping water on the fire, but complications have arisen because of the porous nature of the volcanic soil. “We have a front that is moving through the subsoil that is giving us much trouble,” said Garajonay National Park director Angel Fernandez. “We are studying alternatives, and have brought an expert analyst here to see how to fix this.”

The Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) president of La Gomera Island Council, Casimiro Curbelo, criticised central government for following a “scorched earth”

policy and delays in sending help. He said the “eight or ten” seaplanes sent to the island were “insufficient” compared to the 12 sent to Andalusia, where the threat was less and demanded “a permanent presence of aircraft” on La Gomera.

Officials from the PP government denied they had been slow to help. Environment Minister Miguel Arias Cañete declared that his department had “met all requests for Canary promptly, without delay.”

Cañete claimed somewhat disingenuously, that “In a year when my department’s budget was cut by 29.5 percent, the only part that was raised was the part for forest fires”—from €71 million to €74 million (\$90 million).

There can be few occasions when boasting of being spared the axe of an overall budget cut of almost a third is seen as a retort to criticism.

Shifting the blame for the disaster on the regions, he added, “Each one decides freely where it will make cuts. Each region will have to analyse whether its fire prevention measures are sufficient.”

Elsewhere, a smaller fire has burned hundreds of hectares on the neighbouring island of Tenerife, an important tourist destination. On the mainland two fires were extinguished last week in Cuenca and Ciudad Real after destroying over 600 hectares. In Alicante a forest fire claimed the lives of an environment department worker and a fireman, and left three injured.

The country’s biggest fire so far this year, and the largest since 1991, started at the end of June. It has ravaged 49,000 hectares (nearly 200 square miles) in Cortes de Pallás and Andilla in the eastern region of Valencia. Around 1,300 personnel, including firemen, police, Red Cross and civil protection officers, along with 40 airplanes, participated. Thousands of people were forced to evacuate the area. Palls of smoke spread

northwards along the coast, blocking out the sun above holiday resorts.

In the north-eastern region of Catalonia two fires destroyed 10,000 hectares of land in La Jonquera, close to the French border and the coastal town Portbou, claiming four victims, all French, and injuring 24 others. Hundreds of cattle were killed. The ash and fumes reached the city of Barcelona over 150 kilometres away.

With no defence of the cuts possible, politicians and ministers have attempted to blame the fires on arsonists, “irresponsible individuals”, strong winds, and high temperatures combined with a dry winter. Typical was Catalan Interior Minister Felip Puig, who declared the fires the work of a human hand, “most certainly by a flicked cigarette” before ordering the police to pursue “those responsible”.

There are, of course, environmental factors precipitating this disaster. This winter has been the driest in 70 years; temperatures have risen well above 30 degrees at the same time as humidity has remained less than 30 percent and winds have been blowing over 30 kilometers per hour.

But a major factor exacerbating the extreme ecological conditions has been the austerity measures that have been imposed.

In mid July, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy announced a new €65 billion (\$79 billion) package of cuts, the third since his election last November. The latest measures came on top of previous cuts, amounting to €48 billion, agreed between the central government and 17 autonomous regions. The cuts, which have helped plunge Spain into the second deepest recession in its history, are being made to meet the demands of the “troika”—the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB)—which act as enforcers for the global banks and speculators.

In Catalonia, the regional government has cut between 25 to 34 percent of its budget for prevention of fires and firefighting, according to the two main unions, the CCOO (Comisiones Obreras—Workers’ Commissions) and the UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores—General Union of Workers). Back in February, at a public hearing (video), Catalan firefighters warned of the consequences of the cuts, saying that there was “an imminent problem” with

regard to this year’s high-risk season.

So drastic were the cuts that there were not enough funds to cover the cost of uniforms this year. According to Antonio del Río, UGT firefighters representative, “There were some people who couldn’t help extinguish the flames because they had no boots or gloves.”

In Valencia, the regional government has cut €15 million from its firefighting budget, resulting in the loss of 700 jobs linked to firefighting and three fewer airplanes. According to Francisco Caballero, UGT secretary of the firefighting sector in Valencia, retirees have not been replaced, meaning that “at least 10 percent of the professionals have been reduced.”

Valencia was the first region to ask for emergency funding, estimated to be around €3 billion, from the recently created €18 billion Regional Liquidity Fund (FLA). Finance Minister Cristóbal Montoro has made it clear that the region will “be obligated to follow new conditions”, i.e., new austerity measures. Last week, the indebted central region of Castilla-La Mancha announced plans to cut its number of firefighters by almost a third.



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