

## Forest Fires of Summer 2022: Lessons to Draw from the Cohesion Policy Response



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Europe is grappling with increased wildfires due to climate extremes, with protected areas especially vulnerable and fires in contaminated lands presenting distinctive challenges.

### Main observations

**The year 2022 marked a significant increase in wildfire activity across Europe.** In some instances, burnt area was 5-13 times higher than the past decade's average, accumulating to a total surface area more than three times the size of Luxembourg.

### The study

evaluates Cohesion Policy funding and EU mechanisms to ensure wildlife and nature conservation, prevent and tackle forest fires, and secure rapid economic recovery.

This surge in wildfires was exacerbated by prolonged heatwaves, droughts especially in early spring, and strong or unusual wind patterns. **Dry conditions led to the lowest recorded soil moisture in fifty years** and 63% of rivers registering far below-average discharge, emphasizing 2022 as the driest year in recent history.

Countries and regions traditionally considered low-risk for wildfires, found themselves grappling with large-scale fires and extreme fire behaviour. The lack of experience, preparedness, and adequate resources in these areas significantly hindered containment efforts. Additionally, effective wildfire management in regions with unexploded ordinances (UXO) has emerged as a crucial concern.

Europe's protected zones, notably the Natura2000 sites, also reported a surge in wildfire occurrences and burned area, highlighting a critical absence of comprehensive fire management strategies.



The Cohesion Policy framework, including the Cohesion Fund, European Regional Development Fund, Interreg programme, and Solidarity Fund, supports wildfire risk management. Investments from previous cycles have contributed to reducing the risk of extreme wildfires and enhancing response systems, landscape management, and risk awareness. However, challenges in fund allocation, governance and lacking wildfire expertise within ministries have resulted in fund underutilization or reallocation and undermining the sustainability of their impact. Notably, investments have leaned heavily towards detection and response, with insufficient attention to long-term resilience building, nature preservation, and prevention.

### Conclusions and policy recommendations

Research indicates that a focus on preventive measures yields cost-effective outcomes. **An estimated €1 investment in prevention could save €4 to €7 in response and recovery expenses.** There is a pressing need to bolster investment in training



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and capability enhancement, as **only a handful of countries believe their firefighting personnel are prepared for the intensifying wildfire threats.**

The study calls for **increased investment in training, capacity building, and proactive measures** such as fuel management, prescribed fire application, and forest health. The potential of climate-smart sustainable forest management (SFM) and the alignment of funding instruments with global wildfire initiatives could better serve the global wildland fire community's needs, leverage international expertise, and promote effective capacity development in fire management.

The study also recommends:

- addressing funding shortcomings,
- enhancing coordination across funding mechanisms
- establishing EU-wide legal frameworks,
- promoting multi-stakeholder approaches,
- creating a centralized platform for wildfire investment,
- ensuring adequate capacity and funding for DG ECHO, in particular for the Wildfire Peer Review Assessment Framework, and

- forming an EU-coordinated wildfire expertise team.

In terms of practical application the research emphasises the need for:

- clear guidelines on prescribed fire use,
- guidance for new fire-prone countries,
- strategy consolidation,
- expanding the scope of the DG-ECHO Expert Exchange Programme,
- supporting a unified communication strategy and risk culture,
- promoting international collaboration and best practices,
- investing in training and standardization,
- reviewing management plans for protected areas,
- promoting research and innovation, and
- establishing a European Wildfire and Mitigation Fund.

These recommendations aim to enhance integrated wildfire management, funding accessibility and impact, and wildfire risk reduction across the EU.

*Appropriateness of evaluated funding schemes fit to Integrated Fire Management*

	Cohesion Funds	EU Solidarity Fund	European Regional Development Fund	Interreg
<b>WILDFIRE PEER-REVIEW ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK (DG-ECHO)</b>				
Governance of wildfire risk management	?	×	?	✓
Wildfire risk assessment	?	×	?	?
Wildfire risk management planning	∅	∅	?	✓
Wildfire Prevention	×	×	?	✓
Wildfire Preparedness	✓	∅	?	✓
Response	✓	∅	?	✓
Recovery and lessons learned	∅	∅	?	∅
<b>GENERAL CRITERIA PROVIDED FOR THIS STUDY</b>				
Wildlife and nature preservation	∅	×	?	✓
Preventing and tackling forest fires	∅	×	∅	✓
Secure and rapid economic recovery	∅	∅	∅	?

**KEY:**  
 Are funds fit for addressing the listed criteria?  
 ✓ yes    × no    ∅ somewhat    ? unknown

Source: Pau Costa Foundation (authors analysis)

Note: Based on available information, the table analyses the perceived current appropriateness of the Cohesion Policy to ensure wildlife and nature conservation, prevent and tackle forest fires, and secure a rapid economic recovery offering a suggested level of fitness for each relevant policy/ fund based on how funds were used.

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