



Press Release: Portugal's Fires Are Not Inevitable

Cranfield, 22. June 2017 – The fires that swept Portugal this week, killing 64 people to date, are as much the result of land use choices as of the dry, hot weather affecting the Iberian peninsula, the European Agroforestry Federation (EURAF) said today. Changing the way land is used is the surest way of preventing their recurrence.

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“Fires need fuel. The effect of Portugal's rural exodus, its overreliance on fire control equipment, and above all the misguided effort to segregate land use seems perversely designed to ensure as much fuel as possible is available for hot weather fires,” said Dr João Palma, of the University of Lisbon.

While the loss of life of the past week has been exceptional, the fires themselves, sadly, are not. Large fires recur almost every year in Portugal: the average burned every year is above 100,000 ha, or 1.1% of the country's area, causing damage of about 0.3 billion €, or a third of the total value of the country's forests¹.

Depressingly, year after year, the same wooded regions are burnt, while the same wooded areas are spared.

The burnt areas consist mostly of forest plantations and abandoned agricultural lands. While the first are productive and the second, by definition, are not, they have one thing in common: they accumulate fuel. A lot of it.

Forests are littered with accumulated leaves and branches, and their dense stands of thin, tall trunks are a feedstock for fires. Abandoned lands are covered in dry bushes and shrubs. These are ideal conditions for fires to start and spread.

What the spared areas have in common is a completely different look. Instead of dense forests or vast expanses of scrublands, these lands are covered with stands of widely planted trees, mostly oaks, growing across vast pastures. These landscapes, known as *montados* (or *dehesas* across the border in Spain), are iconic: they are the home of the black Iberian pig and the source of most of the world's wine corks.

“They are also almost impossible to burn,” said Dr María Rosa Mosquera-Losada of the University of Santiago and EURAF President.

¹ http://www.acad-ciencias.pt/document-uploads/8250166_louro,-graca---a-economia-da-floresta-e-do-sector-florestal-em-portugal.pdf



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The thick bark of cork oaks is an adaptation to fire, acting as an insulator protecting the tree. The land under them is kept clear of accumulated plant matter by the pigs, sheep, cattle and poultry that graze or browse on it. When a fire does come, it is a light grass fire, starved of fuel, and it causes little damage. It is easily survived by the trees and put out by firefighters.

This form of land use is not only fireproof: it is profitable. By combining trees with a crop (grass) and livestock into what is one the many forms of land use incorporating trees known as "agroforestry", *montado* owners protect their lands while making money.

By contrast, when fire strikes fuel-rich forests or scrublands, an inferno quickly takes hold. The fires can become firestorms, killing everything in their paths. They are almost impossible to stop and to control. They regularly claim the lives of firefighters. Little is left to harvest in their wake. "By investing in dense forest stands, these owners are taking the risk of ruining their lands, damaging their communities, and losing their investment," Dr Palma added.

Owners are supposed to clear their lands of shrubs and accumulated brand and leaf fall. But they usually fail to do so: mechanical clearance, using machinery and labour, is prohibitively expensive, and penalties for noncompliance are not enforced, while measures (i.e. Measure 8.3) linked to EU Rural Development Programmes favouring forest grazing to prevent forest fires are not adopted.

The *montados* rarely burn, because their lands are kept free of fuel. "What is so sad about these fires is how avoidable they are," Dr Mosquera added. "Far from costing money, clearing land can bring in revenue in the form of meat, milk, and wool".

EURAF calls for the recognition that fires can be avoided by encouraging land users to adopt suitable land use systems. These are land uses that minimise tree litter and shrub growth through grazing and are based on widely spaced trees. Portugal should encourage active land users to establish agroforestry practices and systems, while incentivising absent owners to let their lands be grazed by others, for example through profit-sharing schemes.

"We can make sure that firestorms and/or become a thing of the past," said Dr Mosquera. "They are not a fatality, but the result of our decisions. In these regions affected by hot, dry spells, agroforestry is clearly the optimal way of using land. It must be promoted."

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About EURAF - The European Agroforestry Federation (EURAF) aims at promoting the use of trees on farms as well as any kind of silvopastoralism throughout the different environmental regions of Europe. EURAF has about over 1000 members from 20 different European countries.

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