

INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP
**"Forest Fires in the Wildland-Urban Interface and Rural Areas in Europe: An
integral planning and management challenge"**

Overview

The International Scientific Workshop on "Forest Fires in the Wildland-Urban Interface and Rural Areas in Europe: an integral planning and management challenge" was held successfully on May 15 & 16, 2003, in Athens, Greece.

The problem

In the last years, forest fires affecting the Wildland-Urban Interface and Rural Areas (W-UI/RA) have populated news front-pages around the world, as one of the most dramatic natural events in which human lives and properties are threatened and destroyed. Several recent examples in USA, Australia, Asia and Europe have exceeded the circle of fire managers, specialists and scientists, touching directly public sensibility and often becoming a major preoccupation.

Fires in the W-UI/RA have been studied and characterised in the USA, Canada and Australia, among other countries, for decades. Looking at this experience, a number of European Union co-funded research projects are now focusing into the reality of W-UI/RA fire management in Europe. Within the scope of one of these projects, entitled WARM (Wildland-Urban Area Fire Risk Management), the current event was organised as follow-up of the first workshop on W-UI/RA user needs that was held in Marseille (France) in June 2002.

The project WARM is focused on the problem of forest fire in areas where there is an interface of forests and settlements. Its general objective is to identify and characterise direct and indirect risks to the human activity due to the fire occurrence in the wildland-urban interface (W-UI) in Europe. WARM aims to provide a methodology to minimise losses of residences and other structures, while reducing social and environmental impact. An information system is planned to offer assistance in the elaboration of rationalised, encompassed wildfire defence plans. The project is co-funded by the Direction of Environment of the European Commission within the 5th Framework Research Program.

The workshop

The International Workshop took place in the conference room of the Institute of Mediterranean Forest Ecosystems and Forest Products Technology (IMFE&FPT) of the National Agricultural Research Foundation of Greece (NAGREF), in Athens.

The workshop was co-organized by:

- The Institute of Mediterranean Forest Ecosystems and Forest Products Technology, Forest Fire Laboratory, Athens, Greece (a partner of the WARM project).

- The General Secretariat for Civil Protection. Athens, Greece.
- The General Directorate for the Development and Protection of Forests and Natural Environment of the Ministry of Rural Development and Food, Athens, Greece.
- The General Secretary of the Region of Attica, Athens, Greece
- ALGOSYSTEMS S.A., Athens, Greece (a partner of the WARM project).
- TECNOMA S.A., Madrid, Spain (the coordinator of the WARM project).

The objective of the workshop was to give the opportunity to various research groups and operational managers from European countries, to meet and exchange points of view and research findings concerning the fire problems encountered in areas where forest, rural and urban areas intermix, creating the so-called Wildland-Urban interfaces (WUI) which have become quite extensive in the last decades.

Participation

The workshop attracted more than 160 participants from Greece and other European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Slovakia, and Spain). The Prefect of Eastern Attica Mr. L. Kouris, the General Director of the General Directorate for the Development and Protection of Forests and Natural Environment Mr. D. Benidis, representatives of the General Secretariat of Civil Protection, the headquarters of the Greek Fire Corps, the General Secretary of the Region of Attica, and representatives of the administration of NAGREF were present at the opening session of the workshop and delivered short speeches on the significance of the Wildland-Urban interface problem and their points of view.

The audience and the speakers included both researchers and operational officers from various state and local authorities in Europe. The three main European research projects dealing with the WUI issue, namely WARM, FIRESTAR and SPREAD, were represented and contributed to the content of the workshop. Two more wildland fire-related European research projects, namely AUTO-HAZARD PRO and FIREGUARD, were also represented by their coordinators. AUTO-HAZARD PRO offered an overview of its activities and an explanation of its relevance to the WUI issue.

The papers presented were very interesting and covered such aspects as examples of fire disasters in the wildland-urban interface in Europe, planning problems in such areas, solutions and guidelines, many of them as findings of current research, and, finally, modern technologies that can help improve planning and development of WUI areas. Of particular interest was the presentation of Mr. Jack Cohen, a researcher of the US Forest Service, who was the invited speaker of the workshop. Mr. Cohen, who has focused his research on the WUI problem in USA for more than ten years, presented the newer developments in the field, simultaneously providing the opportunity to the audience to comprehend the conditions that prevail in the USA. His participation and contribution to the discussion that followed was also very important. That session offered a good opportunity for exchange of examples and views from the perspective of countries with very different environments and social conditions.