



PRESPA PARK REPORT

PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT ON TRANSBOUNDARY FIRE-FIGHTING AND CONTINGENCY COOPERATION IN THE PRESPA PARK AREA

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"Although the idea of a natural frontier has long been a basic tenet of geography and political science, the environmental impact of transfrontier cooperation is today unequivocally revealing the spatial continuity of frontier areas and hence the need for their joint management to cope with problems of pollution, soil degradation and optimal land use. The current process of changes in Europe is posing new and compelling challenges to regional co-operation in general and to co-operation in the fields of the environment and the security in particular. With the emergence of new countries with economies in transition, new frontiers are cutting through regions, creating more transboundary situations and issues."

(excerpt from a report presented on the 6th session of the Congress of the Local and Regional Authorities of Europe - CLRAE [1])

Preliminary Assessment

on Transboundary Fire-fighting and Contingency Cooperation in the Prespa Park Area

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1. Introduction

On 2 February 2000, the Prime Ministers of Albania, Greece and the FYR of Macedonia met in Prespa and declared the establishment of the Prespa Park, the first transboundary protected area in Southeast Europe. This signalled a new era for the protection and conservation of the area, and for the promotion of sustainable development and international cooperation in the region.

The main Prespa Park institution is the Prespa Park Coordination Committee (PPCC). In its everyday work, the PPCC is assisted by a Secretariat consisting of three members from the participating NGOs, with its seat located at the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP) office in Aghios Germanos, Greek Prespa.

Among various activities in the context of the Prespa Park organised and implemented by the PPCC, its Secretariat and other actors, in 2003 a "Hellenic Aid" project provided support to the institutional cooperation between the three countries, aiming to streamline collaboration at various sectoral or subject-specific levels, such as between the local municipalities and the fire-fighting authorities responsible for the area. This project addressed the operation of the PPCC, cooperation between the local Municipalities of the Prespa basin, as well as preliminary activities for the initiation of cooperation of the fire management authorities in the region, which culminated in the organisation of the first Working Meeting of the Fire-Fighting Authorities of the Prespa area. The project was implemented by the SPP, with the collaboration of PPNEA in Albania, and the Municipality of Resen in the FYR of Macedonia.

This preliminary report aims to collect relevant information on the forest conditions and forest fire situation in the area, to present the basics of the fire management organisations of the three countries, and the national and EU legislation on fire protection, and to highlight transboundary issues, such as cross-border fires, existing fire-fighting cooperation between the three countries and its perspectives, as well as the organisation of the first Working Meeting of the Fire-Fighting Authorities of the area.

2. Description of the Area

2.1 Geography

Prespa is a transboundary area shared by Albania, Greece, and the FYR of Macedonia. It is a high-altitude basin consisting of two interconnected lakes, Micro Prespa (47.4 km²) and Macro Prespa (259.4 km²), which are located at approximately 850m asl and surrounded by forested mountain regions. The most prominent mountains are: to the East, Mt. Pelister (2,601 m) in the FYR of Macedonia and Mt. Varnous (2,334 m) in Greece; to the West, Mt. Mali i Thate (2,288 m) and Mt. Galichitsa (2,254 m) in Albania and the FYR of Macedonia, respectively, and to the Southeast, Mt. Sfika or Triklarion (1,749 m), in Greece. The catchment area of the two lakes is 2,519.1 km² [2].

2.2 Vegetation

The successive vegetation zones from the lakeshores to the mountain summits are: forest formations (lowland woodland, deciduous oak, beech, and mixed beech-fir forests), sub-alpine vegetation of dwarf shrubs, and alpine meadows [2]. Apart from the

aforementioned forest formations, a considerable part of the catchment is occupied by reed beds, farmland, and human settlements. More specifically, extensive reed beds can be found in parts of the Micro Prespa lakeshore, and much less so in Macro Prespa; farmland and settlements occupy the lower and more level parts of the Prespa basin, situated mainly in the FYR of Macedonia, and to a lesser extent in parts of the Albanian and Greek catchment.

Forests in the Albanian part of Prespa consist primarily of oak (63%) and beech (15%). Illegal logging for the collection of firewood, tree lopping for the collection of winter fodder, and overgrazing of subalpine and alpine meadows seriously threaten these forests, and most of them have deteriorated into unproductive shrub. Furthermore, during the years 1998-1992 some 270 ha were afforested with pines *Pinus nigra* and *Pinus sylvestris*, species not indigenous to the area. According to the Prespa Park Strategic Action Plan (SAP), there is need for a forestry development and management plan and a sustainable forestry system.

In Greek Prespa, there are six forest complexes covering 17,422 ha, managed either as coppice or as spermatophytic forests. An estimated 3% of the inhabitants are occupied in forestry. In general, fully or partially forested areas cover 60.6% of the region. According to SAP, there is need for integrated management plans of the forest complexes that would address the degraded forests in the area.

In the part of Prespa belonging to the FYR of Macedonia, forests are managed by "Prespa Drvo", which is a regional unit of the central public enterprise for management of forests, "Makedonski Sumi." Prespa Drvo manages approximately 494 ha of coniferous forest, 13,000 ha of tall-trunked forest and 7,000 ha of small trunked forest, occupying 75 workers. Forest management policy in the FYR of Macedonia promotes sustainable management and combats illegal harvesting. Currently, there is need for additional measures for combating illegal logging and for the afforestation of degraded forest areas [2].

A map of the main vegetation types of the area is found in Annex I.

2.3 Climate

The climate of the Prespa Lake area is mild continental-central European with Mediterranean features. The average annual precipitation ranges between 600 and 900mm, and the wet season lasts from October to May, but in higher ground conditions are generally wetter. Snowfall is common from October until April. Wind velocities are low throughout the year [2].

2.4 Demographics and Economy

The area is sparsely populated, with ca. 24,000 inhabitants in all three countries. The vast majority of the population reside near the lakeshore. The inhabitants are mainly occupied in the primary sector of the economy, although the tertiary sector is expected to increase in significance in the coming years.

3. Forest Fire Situation

3.1 Collection of Fire Data

In Albania, forest fire data are collected by the Forestry Districts and evaluated by the General Directorate of Forests and Pastures [3].

In Greece, the Greek Forest Service was responsible for forest fire fighting until 1997, and collected statistics on forest fires for many decades. Forest Service officers at the local offices were required to file reports on each forest fire incident in their area. The Fire Corps, which has become responsible for forest fire fighting since 1998, has continued on the same line. The statistics collected by the two services, especially in regard to the number of fire incidents, are not directly comparable [4].

In the FYR of Macedonia, long-term statistics on various fire data are kept by the Forestry and Water Management of the Ministry of Agriculture (FWM), by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), and by the Republican Statistical Bureau (RSB). The FWM keeps a record of fires on forestlands only. The RSB keeps a record on all fires, but registers only the parameters relevant to purely statistical use. The most complete record on urban and forest fires (forest lands, dumps and other open urban/ rural spaces) is kept at the Directorate for Fire Protection, Explosions and Dangerous Materials, MIA [5].

3.2 Forest Fire Statistics and Dynamics

The forest fire situation in the Prespa catchment is more difficult to assess in comparison to other regions of the three countries, since it is a sensitive border region and precise data are not always easy to access. Moreover, in some cases data tend to be deficient or completely lacking, especially for the Albanian part of the catchment - at least during the last years - due to the lack of appropriate censusing. On the other hand, time series from the Municipality of Resen in the FYR of Macedonia, spanning from 1989 to 2002, are more complete.

Due to the lack of homogeneity, the differences in censusing, and the absence of complete and reliable time series for the *whole* Prespa catchment, forest fire data cannot be presented in a tabular form, and only a qualitative overview can be given for each country, separately.

Apart from the above, it is also noteworthy that a strong fluctuation can be noticed in the number of fire incidents and the area burned each year, depending on weather and other conditions. This, combined with the lack of average values for Albania and Greece, might accordingly make the forest fire situation even less straightforward to interpret.

Data from the Forestry Service of Korcha (FSK) suggest an average 2-3 fire incidents per year in Albanian Prespa, with an affected area of approximately 1.5 ha, as registered in year 2001. Most fires occur in the woodland/ shrub area, although in some cases farmhouses and stables are also burned.

According to fire data for the whole of Albania during the 1981-2001 period [3], most forest fires occur in the summer months and in September. The worst years were 1997 and 2000. During this 20-year period, an exponential increase in the burned area has been observed. In the last few years, the affected area as a percentage of the total land surface of Albania reached values exceeding by far the average values of other Mediterranean countries. This is also corroborated by the findings of the Global Forest Resources Assessment [6] by the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) Forestry Department. According to this report, Albania was the only South European country

where the area of forest declined between 1990 and 2000, as opposed to the other countries of the region which exhibited a net gain in forest coverage.

In Greek Prespa, according to the Fire Service of Florina (FSF), there were 5-18 fire incidents between 2001 and 2003, with a burned area widely ranging from 3.4 to 80 ha. The fires occurring in the region are mainly surface fires, and rarely mixed. A snapshot of the distribution of burned areas in Greek Prespa is given below:

- Forests: 24.0 ha (comprising 22.3% of the total burned area)
- Forested areas: 33.1 ha (30.7%)
- Grassland and meadows: 12.0 ha (11.1%)
- Agricultural land: 32.2 ha (29.9%)
- Lakeside reed beds: 6.30 ha (5.8%)
- Roadside banks: 0.14 ha (0.1%)

It is interesting to note that the percentage of reed beds (5.8%) in the burned areas is not negligible in Greek Prespa, whereas in the other two countries it is not accounted for, or is inexistent. This is due to the fact that Greek Prespa region encompasses the greatest part (approximately 90%) of Lake Micro Prespa, a lake with extensive reed beds.

For the whole of Greece, fire data indicate that the number of fire incidents has been steadily increasing during the last three decades, and this can be attributed to a more thorough effort to record forest fires, but also to increased activity of people in or near the forests and forested lands [4, 6]. In the beginning of the 1980s, the size of the burned area also started to rapidly increase, although the larger number of fires was not the only reason. Fires gradually have become more difficult to fight due to the changing condition of forests (increased accumulation of dead biomass, due to the abandonment of traditional practices) and to the development of urban/ wild land interfaces. A comprehensive analysis on forest fire statistics and dynamics in Greece can be found in [4].

According to the Directorate for Fire Protection of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) of the FYR of Macedonia, during the 1997-2002 period there were 8-113 fire incidents in the Municipality of Resen, with a burned area ranging from 13.1 to 148.0 ha. Data from the years 1989-2002 give average yearly values of 33.29 fire incidents, and 89.66 ha of burned area. A table containing all values for the years 1989-2000 can be found in [5].

The distribution of fires in the Municipality of Resen is as follows:

- Forests/ forest land: 69% by area, 15.0% by number of fires
- Agricultural land: 18% by area, 39.9% by number of fires
- Other: 13% by area, 45.1% by number of fires

Although only 15% of the fires occurred in forests and woodland, they accounted for more than 2/3 of the total burned area, and that should be attributed to the difficulties in extinguishing forest fires (lack of appropriate equipment, shortage of staff, difficult terrain, etc.), as opposed to agricultural and urban fires.

3.3 Forest Fire Causes

According to the Forestry Service of Korcha [7], the causes of fires in Albanian Prespa are predominantly human, caused either by accident or negligence. In the rest of Albania, forest fires are caused by:

- Negligence: 29%
- Intention: 9%
- Unknown reasons: 61%
- Lightning: 1%

It is, nevertheless, stressed that the majority of fires classified as “caused by unknown reason” should be considered human-caused, although the exact causes could not be tracked down [3]. Forest fires caused by negligence or carelessness result mainly from cropland burning and clearing fields for agricultural purposes, cigarettes and picnic fires, and fires set by shepherds or hunters. Arson cases may include clear-cutting for agricultural purposes and fires set for covering up of criminal activity. A comprehensive analysis of human-related forest fire causes in Albania can be found in a 2001 FAO report [8].

According to the Fire Service of Florina [7], the main causes of fire in Greek Prespa are human (accidents or negligence) and natural (lightning). In the rest of Greece, fire data indicate that between 1968 and 1993 fires have been caused by:

- Negligence (incl. stubble burning, cigarettes, garbage): 36.0%
- Accidents (incl. power lines, engine sparks, explosives): 3.5%
- Deliberate causes (incl. rangeland improvement, arson): 29.2%
- Lightning: 2.4%
- Unknown causes: 28.9%

Full statistics and analysis of the fire causes in Greece are available in [4].

According to MIA data, the causes of forest fires in the FYR of Macedonia are:

- Accidents and negligence: 65.0%
- Arson: 7.5%
- Natural causes (e.g. lightning): 1-2%
- Unknown causes: 25.5%

As is the case with the other two countries, fires falling under the category “unknown cause” are considered to be largely human-caused.

4. Fire management organisations

4.1 National Level

In Albania, the responsible body for operational forest fire management is the Forestry Service, which is supervised by the General Directorate of Forests and Pastures (GDFFP), Ministry of Agriculture. The Forestry Service is the technical organ for planning, prevention, coordination, intervention and inquiry responsibilities. The establishment of a Forest Fire Service in Albania is expected to significantly increase the capacity of forest fire management [3].

In Greece, until 1997 the organisation responsible for forest fires was the Forest Service. In May 1998, responsibility for forest fire fighting was given by law to the Fire Corps, which until that time was responsible for urban fires but also contributed to forest fire fighting. In the year 2003, the permanent personnel of the Fire Corps exceeded 10,000 employees, and a further 5,000 seasonal employees were added in the summer months. The Fire Corps holds 1,100 fire trucks and 200 support vehicles [4, 9]. Additionally, local authorities provide water to the fire trucks, in the case of fires occurring near

settlements, and state-owned aircraft and helicopters operated by the Air Force contribute to fire suppression and fire-fighting coordination. The Greek Fire Corps has a top-down structure, and it is one of the few state organizations not broken down into a regionalised structure during the 1990s. It is argued [4] that this is a significant advantage for the task of fire fighting as it allows easy mobility of resources between regions and good central coordination. On the other hand, the military-like structure of the Fire Corps that includes army-equivalent ranks results in coordination by the servicemen of the highest rank only, and not necessarily by the best qualified.

Most aspects of fire prevention still lie with the Forest Service, which is responsible by law for forest fire prevention. The Forest Service has a regional structure without provision for effective central coordination. Moreover, the Forest Service has been weakened significantly as approximately one fourth of its personnel and many pieces of equipment (vehicles, radios) were moved to the Fire Corps. Its current number of employees is less than 2,800 (year 2000 figures). It has been argued [4] that the regional structure of the Forestry Service might have reduced its effectiveness, or at least made it variable by region, and that the reduction in personnel and lack of appropriate funding could result in inadequate forest management and fire prevention. The transfer of responsibility from the Forest Services to the Fire Services in many South European countries, and its consequences, have also been an issue of discussion at a relevant FAO Meeting [10].

Another Greek state organisation involved in forest fires, and in disaster management in general, is the General Secretariat for Civil Protection (GSCP), Ministry of Interior, established by law in 1995 and gradually organised in the late 1990s. GSCP has a coordinating role for all types of disasters, including forest fires. In this area it provides support to the Fire Corps from local authorities (Regions, Prefectures, Municipalities) with regard to equipment and auxiliary personnel. Planning by the GSCP includes, among other things, coordination for evacuations. Both the Fire Corps and the GSCP mobilise volunteers who can help in fire-fighting and other disasters. The effort to date has had some results, and an estimated 500 volunteers are used in fire fighting [4].

Upon request, the Greek Army may also support fire-fighting activities, such as surveillance by soldiers or mop-up of fires that have been brought under control, reducing the number of fire fighters needed to remain on site. The Army may contribute with heavy-duty equipment, such as bulldozers, upon request. The Police are also indirectly related in some fire-fighting activities, such as evacuation tasks, arson investigations, and surveillance activities.

In the FYR of Macedonia at national level, fire protection in general, and fire protection of forest and range fires in particular, are under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and its organisational structures. The principle authority for fire protection is the Directorate for Fire Protection, Explosions and Dangerous Materials, Ministry of Internal Affairs, its responsibilities including fire pre-suppression, suppression and liquidation.

4.2 Prespa Region

In Albanian Prespa, the Forestry Service of Korcha is the responsible organisation for forest fire fighting. FSK has very limited equipment for fire fighting. Locally, some additional equipment can be found in Gorica e Vogel, at the Liqenas Commune (Albanian Macro Prespa). Additionally, four people are employed seasonally (June to September) in the Prespa area. The role of the special authorities is not explicitly defined. Although there is no specific contingency plan, some special provisions for fire prevention and suppression do exist. The technical equipment mainly consists of hand tools (axe,

pickaxe, shovel, etc). The equipment and infrastructure, as well as the organisational structure are considered to be insufficient to meet the demands. Lack of equipment, shortage staff and lack of contingency planning are the most serious problems. In case of fire incidents, the response times vary, depending on the location of the fire; usually information is gathered during the first 20 minutes.

In Greek Prespa, the responsible organisation for fire fighting is the Fire Service of Florina. During the summer season, there is a fire contingency plan for the area, and FSF provides a patrol vehicle, which is present at the Pervali Pass, between Mt. Triklarion and Mt. Varnous, from 10:00 to 20:00 hours. FSF has the standard equipment and technical infrastructure, but in cases of emergency, support can be provided by ground units of the Regional Command of Western Macedonia, and by aerial means. According to FSF, the resources for fire fighting in Greek Prespa are considered adequate, but, nevertheless, the possible upgrading of the Fire Station from C Class to B Class could enhance its effectiveness. The response times vary, and they range from 0 to 20 minutes when the patrol vehicle is present, and from 40 to 60 minutes during the winter months, or when the patrol vehicle is absent.

In the part of the basin belonging to the FYR of Macedonia, the main responsible service is the Territorial Fire-Fighting Unit of Resen (TFUR). In case of fire, first actions against the fire are undertaken by the Forest Management Authorities together with TFUR, but the action is under the command of professional fire fighters. Concerning the role of the local self-government, in cases of severe fire incidents, the Mayor of Resen has the power to engage civilians in fire suppression. In Prespa, equipment and infrastructure are mainly adapted to urban fires, and there is lack of specialised forest fire-fighting vehicles, such as all-terrain vehicles or heavy equipment. Accordingly, forest fire suppression is mainly conducted with hand tools, chain saws, back pumps, etc. Besides all efforts for improvement and increased effectiveness by the competent authorities, there is, nevertheless, a need for advanced equipment and technical infrastructure. The response times range from 20 to 40 minutes to the Albanian border, and from 40 to 60 minutes to the Greek border. For some extreme locations, however, such as Mt. Baba near the Greek border, response times may reach two hours or more.

5. Fire Protection Legislation

5.1 National Legislation

Comprehensive coverage and analysis of fire protection legislation in the three countries are beyond the scope of this report and, therefore, only a general reference to the most important and relevant laws and regulations, as stated in the literature, is provided.

In Albania, there are two laws and a set of special regulations/guidelines for the prevention and suppression of forest and range fires [3]: Law on Forests and Forest Service Police, Nr.7623/ 13.10.1992, Law on Fire Protection and Rescue, Nr.8766/ 05.04.2001, Regulation/ Guideline, Nr.25/ 08.02.1993 "On Forest Protection from Fires, Pests, Diseases and Financial Means," Act of Council of Ministers, Nr.288/ 27.06.2002 on "Determining and Taking Fire Protection and Rescue Measures for Objects of Special Importance" (including watersheds and national parks), and Guideline Nr.1/ 30.07.2002 on "Determining and Taking Fire Protection and Rescue Measures for Objects of Economic and State Importance" in virtue of implementing the Act Nr.288/ 27.06.2002.

In Greece, legislation for fire prevention and suppression is extensive. Laws 998/1979 "On the Protection of Forests and Forested Areas of the Country," 2612/1998

"Assignment of Forest Fire Fighting to the Fire Corps, and Other Clauses," as well as Laws 2800/2000 and 2344/1995, Ministerial Decisions 12030/F109.1/10.05.1999 and 19826/F109/1/27.06.2000, and Presidential Decrees 3/2000, 379/1997, and 575/1980, can give the interested reader an in-depth view of the relevant legislation.

In the FYR of Macedonia, the prevention and suppression of forest and range fires until 1989 was based on the forest management plans and on experience, as well as on the provisions of the existing forest law (Official Gazette of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, Nr.20/74, 15/86, 51/88, 20/90 and Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, Nr.37/91, 44/91, 83/92). The increased number of fires in former Yugoslavia from 1985 on, in particular along the Adriatic Sea coast, led to the establishment of new legislation, which was enforced in 1989 as "Regulations for Special Measures of Protection of Forests and Agriculture Land".

5.2 EU Legislation and Policy

In the specific field of forest-fire protection, Council Regulation (EEC) No 2158/92 aims at improving the consistency of forestry measures, especially forest-fire protection measures, financed in areas at risk of forest fire in Community Member-States, including Greece. It achieves this aim by concentrating Community prevention operations in fire-risk areas identified by the Member States, which notify lists of areas with high and medium risk; by requiring the Member States to provide the Commission with their forest-fire protection plans, and other related information; by restricting Community financing to the measures set out in the plans for fire prevention (protective infrastructure and preventive forestry measures) and the analysis of causes, and by adapting the rate of Community assistance to the degree of risk; by making financing of Community forestry measures in high and medium risk areas conditional upon the adoption of plans; and by creating a Community information system on forest fires with a view to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the measures undertaken, in accordance with implementing arrangements laid down in Regulation (EC) No 804/94.

The latter instrument lays down detailed rules for the forest-fire information system. It provides for systematic collection of a set of data (the common core) for all areas in the Member States at risk of forest fire. The forest-fire information system now covers 319 administrative areas (NUTS level III) in the six Member States of the Union at risk from forest fires: Germany, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece.

In the more general field of civil protection from natural and technological disasters, the EC has made considerable effort since the mid-eighties to organise a Community-wide system of assistance and response. A relevant five-year Action Programme for the period 2000-2004 is currently being implemented. The Council has also adopted Decision 2001/792 establishing a Community mechanism to facilitate reinforced co-operation in civil protection assistance interventions. Through this mechanism, it is possible in case of natural, technological and environmental disasters, to mobilise the necessary operational resources to provide prompt support and assist a country (inside and outside the European Union) in need of help. The aim is also to ensure interventions that are better coordinated and more efficient.

The most significant achievements in the field of civil protection in the EU so far have been:

- The establishment of several operational instruments by the Commission in collaboration with the Civil Protection Authorities of Member States that ensure better preparedness in the case of requests for mutual assistance.

- The enhancement of the response capability of all those directly involved with Civil Protection operations. For this purpose several instruments are used which address the human dimension of Civil Protection, help strengthen the interpersonal links that develop naturally during such activities and improve effective mutual assistance.
- Several activities (mostly pilot projects and self-training workshops) dealing directly with specific subject-areas, including forest fires.
- The establishment of the Vade-Mecum of Civil Protection in the EU, which contains a description of the organisation of intervention in Member States, the emergency plans anticipating disasters and a summary of bilateral agreements.
- The adoption of 1-1-2, as the Single European emergency call number for the Union.
- An extensive Research and Development effort in the context of the framework programmes of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (especially in the fields of river and flood management, protection against earthquakes and volcanoes, forest-fire combat strategies as well as emergency management systems using modern information and communications technologies).
- Participation in international co-operation fora and actions including:
 - preparation of candidate Central and Eastern European Countries in view of enlargement
 - co-operation with countries of the Mediterranean region (through the MEDA programme)
 - participation in several international and regional agreements in the field of civil protection, in co-operation with other organisations (Council of Europe, OCDE, UN/ECE, NATO, etc.)

6. Transboundary Issues

6.1 Cross-border Forest Fires in the Prespa Area

Forest fires in the border region of Prespa are a transboundary issue of concern. Albeit rare, forest fires originating from Albania or the FYR of Macedonia have crossed borders and burned forest regions in Greece, and vice-versa. The latest examples of cross-border forest fires in Prespa have been the 1999 and 2000 incidents by the village of Vrondero (near the Greek-Albanian border) and by the village of Aghios Germanos (near the border of Greece with the FYR of Macedonia). During the last decade, similar incidents have more frequently occurred in other border regions of the three countries too.

According to the competent authorities, during the cross-border fire incidents in the wider Prespa area there had been intense efforts by the fire-fighting forces of the respective countries for combating the fires. Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that there was no official coordination between the ground forces engaged.

6.2 Fire-fighting and Contingency Cooperation between the Three Countries

During the last years, a steady increase is observed in international contacts for the prevention and/ or management of natural or technological disasters and the provision of relief. In this context, many countries have decided to establish mutual assistance

arrangements via bilateral and multilateral agreements. Moreover, the placing of international cooperation under the auspices of international organisations can help facilitate and reinforce the process. Such organisations include, among others, the United Nations programmes and specialised agencies, OECD, NATO, the International Civil Defense Organisation, the European Union, the Central European Initiative, and the Council of Europe.

Based on the review of already existing international fire agreements, and on practical experience, the FAO Forestry Department in particular provides information on the general legal considerations regarding international (bi- and multilateral) fire agreements [11], as well as summary guidelines for the development of forest fire agreements [12]. These guidelines cover issues such as executive bodies; expenses and costs; information and coordination; liabilities, claims and compensations; operating plans and operational guidelines; border crossings etc.

An overview of the role of international organisations in this area, organisation and instruments for the management of contingencies, as well as related references, can be found in a 2002 Council of Europe report [1].

Accordingly, in recent years there has been an increase of official and unofficial contacts and meetings between representatives of the fire-fighting organisations of Albania, Greece, and the FYR of Macedonia. In particular, Greece has been more active in promoting fire-fighting cooperation with both Albania and the FYR of Macedonia, especially due to her role as the only EU member state in Southeast Europe, and through the operation of the Department for International Fire-fighting Cooperation, at the Fire Corps Headquarters. Such contacts initially took place at a central level and between high-rank officials. Recently, contacts between the local commanding officers have also been encouraged by the Fire Corps Headquarters of Greece, in the framework of International Working Meetings and Conferences, the Balkan Fire Sports Federation (BFSF), or other events. According to information from the competent authorities, relations between Albania and the FYR of Macedonia are less mature and at a more personal level. Apart from contacts *per se* between the fire-fighting organisations, there has been also provision of assistance in the form of equipment and technical support by Greece.

It has to be stressed, however, that the establishment of more permanent relations and the regular provision of equipment and technical assistance or direct funding, under specific Greek- or EU-supported projects and programmes, will be eventually guided by Protocols of Cooperation between the said countries. Similar agreements have already been signed between Greece and Bulgaria [13], and the Protocols between Greece and FYR of Macedonia, and between Greece and Albania, are already under elaboration. Entry of fire-fighting forces, insurance coverage, financial costs, command and control, exchange of know-how, training, and provision of assistance, are issues that indicatively could be covered by these protocols.

6.3 Working Meeting of the Fire-fighting Authorities of Prespa

As laid down in the Terms of Reference of the PPCC and Secretariat, the mandate of the Committee includes the following point: *"In case of unexpected events, such as floods, forest fires and other natural or anthropogenic catastrophes, the Co-ordination Committee shall contribute to the mobilisation of resources of the three states, and the international community, as appropriate, to mitigate the negative impacts;"* and the scope of work of its Secretariat includes, among others, the *"...study and consultations*

with the competent authorities in the three countries in order to prepare joint contingency plans.”

Moreover, the Prespa Park Strategic Action Plan – conforming to international guidelines on transboundary protected area cooperation - stresses the need to work in collaboration in order to protect the forests of the Prespa basin as a shared resource, and lays down the targets of developing joint contingency plans and of adopting a trilateral contingency Memorandum of Understanding by 2005.

In this context, the SPP organised on 30 October 2003 the first Working Meeting of the Fire-Fighting Authorities in Lemos, Greek Prespa. The participants included representatives from the Korcha Forestry Service (Albania), the Fire Corps Headquarters, the Regional Command of Western Macedonia and the Fire Service of Florina (Greece), the Directorate for Fire Protection, Explosions and Dangerous Materials, and the Territorial Fire-fighting Unit of Resen (FYR of Macedonia), as well as the Mayor of Greek Prespa and the Mayor of Resen, and representatives of SPP and PPNEA, environmental NGOs from Greece and Albania.

The participants hailed the opportunity for this first meeting in the Prespa area, and discussed and exchanged views on protocols of cooperation; provision of assistance and equipment; response times; methodologies of fire forecasts and risk estimation; and organisational issues of the fire management services of the three countries. They also exchanged views on forest fire issues pertaining to the wider Prespa area in particular. The two Mayors contributed to the working meeting by noting that cooperation in the framework of the Prespa Park process, and between the three Municipalities of the Prespa basin in particular, should be used as an example in other regions and other areas of cooperation. All participants acknowledged the fact that fire-fighting cooperation is inevitable, and expressed the view that Greece, as a EU member state, will be the driving force for cooperation in the area. The participants appointed contact persons from the Forestry Service of Korcha, the Fire Service of Florina, and the Territorial Fire-fighting Unit of Resen, entrusted with the task of informing all stakeholders and competent authorities on the relevant steps of the cooperation, and - in the future - assisting in the preparations of draft recommendations for contingency planning for the Prespa Park area.

A report on the working meeting, containing the agenda, brief minutes and list of participants, appears in Annex II.

7. Conclusions

The Declaration of the Prime Ministers on the Establishment of the Prespa Park, the on-going trilateral cooperation in the framework of the Prespa Park process, the acknowledgement of the special needs for the protection of the Prespa basin, the European perspective of the countries of Southeast Europe, the positive international trends in transboundary cooperation in the fields of fire-fighting, and civil protection in general, the increased activity between the Fire Services of the three countries, and the practical and symbolical significance of the first Working Meeting of the fire-fighting authorities of the Prespa Park area, clearly demonstrate that transboundary fire-fighting and contingency cooperation in protected areas in particular, and in sensitive border regions in general, will be one of the future realities in Southeast Europe.

How soon this will have any substantial practical impact in the situation on the ground in Prespa is difficult to determine, since, as already noted, an indispensable prerequisite for

any local initiative is the adoption of high-level bilateral agreements and protocols between the Fire Services and/ or other competent authorities of the three countries. These will provide the framework in which it would be possible to agree on joint contingency plans for the Prespa basin and sign a trilateral contingency memorandum, as foreseen by the Prespa Park SAP.

Awaiting these high-level agreements, the need for other complementary forms of cooperation must also be addressed. These could include: more regular meetings and exchange of views between the local fire-fighting authorities or between the National Park authorities; preparation of draft recommendations for a joint contingency plan for the transboundary Prespa basin; agreements between the Management Authorities of the Protected Areas. A lot can be done to enhance communication between the three sides and improve infrastructure and capacity in the FYR of Macedonia and especially in Albania. Greece, as a EU member, should be the leader of the effort to mobilise the resources required. The contact persons appointed from the Forestry Service of Korcha, the Fire Service of Florina, and the Territorial Fire-fighting Unit of Resen should be provided with the necessary backing by higher authorities in the three states to pursue these ambitious goals.

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9. List of Acronyms

BFSF: Balkan Fire Sports Federation

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FSF: Fire Service of Florina, Greece

FSK: Forestry Service of Korcha, Albania

FWM: Forestry and Water Management, Ministry of Agriculture, FYR of Macedonia

GDFP: General Directorate of Forests and Pastures, Ministry of Agriculture, Albania

GSCP: General Secretariat for Civil Protection, Ministry of Interior, Greece

MIA: Ministry of Internal Affairs, FYR of Macedonia

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

PPCC: Prespa Park Coordination Committee

PPNEA: Protection and Preservation of the Natural Environment in Albania

RSB: Republican Statistical Bureau, FYR of Macedonia

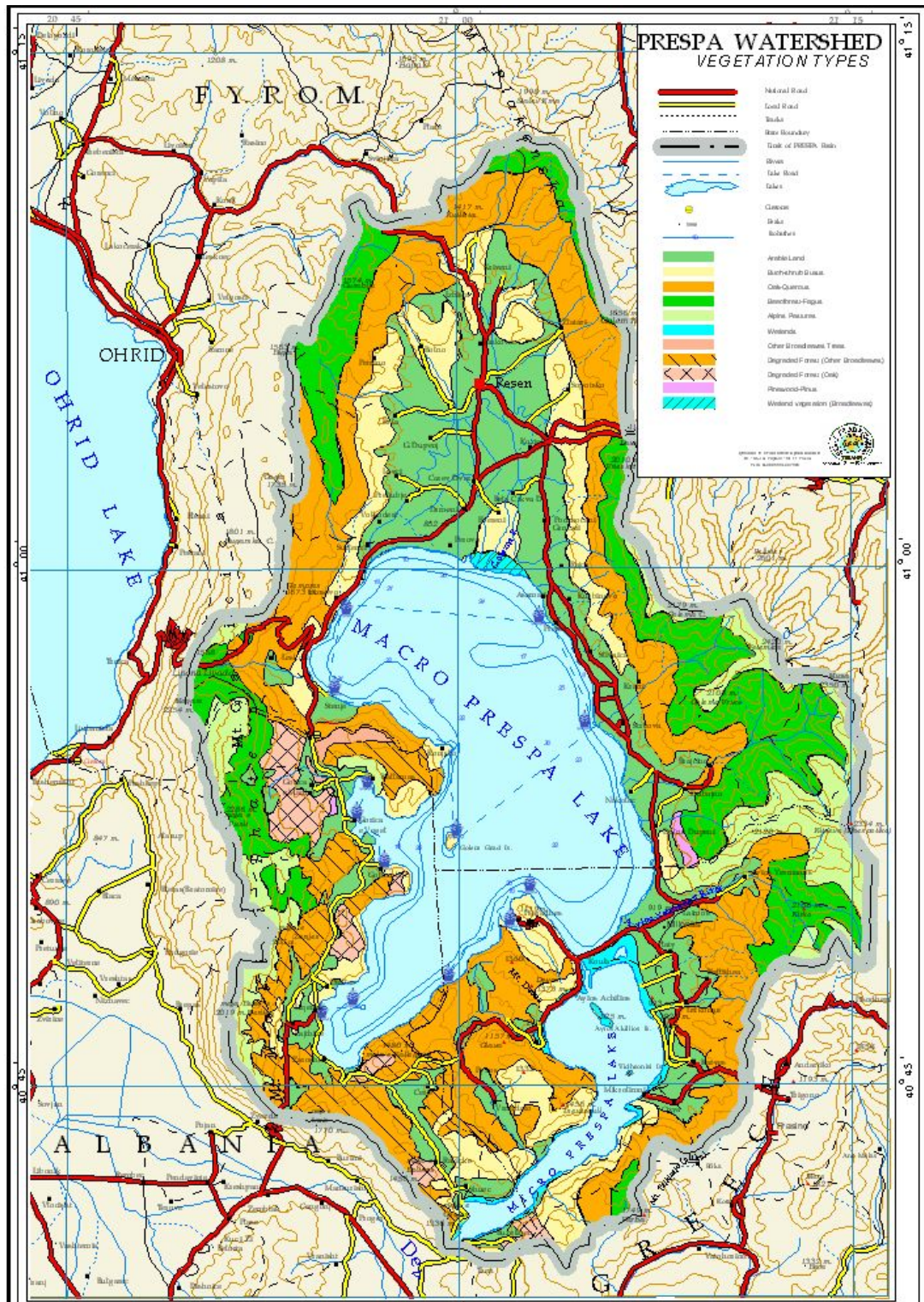
SAP: Strategic Action Plan for the Sustainable Development of the Prespa Park

SPP: Society for the Protection of Prespa

TFUR: Territorial Fire-Fighting Unit of Resen, FYR of Macedonia

Annex I

Map of vegetation types in the Prespa Park Area (map produced by Geographic Studies Center, Tirana, for the Strategic Action Plan)



Annex II

Report of the Working Meeting of the Fire-fighting Authorities of Prespa



WORKING MEETING OF THE FIRE-FIGHTING AUTHORITIES OF THE PRESPA REGION

Lemos, Prespa, 30 October 2003

(financed by the International Development Co-operation
Agency [Hellenic Aid] of the Greek Ministry of Foreign
Affairs)

AGENDA

9.00 – 10.00

Arrival of participants

10.00-10.20

1. Opening of the meeting
 - Welcome address by the Greek delegation
 - Welcome address by the Mayor of Prespa, Mr. L. Nalpantidis
 - Greeting by the Albanian delegation
 - Greeting of the FYR of Macedonia delegation

10.20-12.00

2. Prespa and transboundary protected areas (Mr. M. Gletsos - Society for the Protection of Prespa)
 - Briefing on the Prespa Park
 - Handling of emergency situations in transboundary protected areas
3. Information on the fire-fighting co-operation among the three countries (Fire Corps Headquarters, Greece)
 - Co-operation at a national and local level
 - Capacity building, conferences, training, fire-fighting sports
 - Elaboration of appropriate Protocols/ Memorandums of Co-operation, provision of examples
 - E.U. role in fire-fighting co-operation in SE Europe
 - Future prospects
4. General discussion

12.00-12.20

Coffee break

12.20-14.00

5. Fire-fighting in Prespa, needs and prospects
 - Presentation by the Regional Command of Fire-fighting Services of Western Macedonia Region, Greece
 - Presentation by the respective regional fire-fighting services, Albania
 - Presentation by the respective regional fire-fighting services, the FYR of Macedonia

6. General issues of fire-fighting co-operation in the Prespa region
 - Establishment of regular contacts and meetings
 - Appointment of contact persons at a local and central level
 - Fire-fighting equipment issues - prospects for programmes (E.U. or others) for the equipment of the border regions
 - Co-operation on the field in the Prespa area

7. A joint contingency plan for the confrontation of fires in the Prespa region
 - Connection to/ dependence from the Protocols of Co-operation among the three countries
 - Special reference to the Prespa region as a transboundary protected area
8. General discussion

14.00-14.30

9. Other issues
10. Conclusions and final remarks

14.30-16.00

Lunch

BRIEF MINUTES

1. The Participants expressed their common interest in fire-fighting cooperation, acknowledged the fact that disasters can cross borders, hailed the opportunity for a first working meeting of Prespa Fire-fighting Authorities in the context of the transboundary Prespa Park process, and expressed their willingness to continue the contacts and meetings.
2. The representative of the Greek Fire Corps Headquarters informed his colleagues from the neighbouring countries on the preparation of protocols of cooperation between Greece and Albania, and between Greece and the FYR of Macedonia, which are now processed by the Ministries. Among others, he said that the protocols of cooperation are expected to promote fire-fighting cooperation, and to offer future possibilities for joint projects for provision of assistance and equipment, joint exercises and events.
3. The Participants agreed that the protocols of cooperation would enhance the response times and the intervention capability in Prespa and along the borderline.
4. They exchanged views regarding the systems and methodology of forest fire forecasts and risk estimation in the three countries.
5. They discussed about the structure and operation, the legal aspects, the needs and problems of the competent forest Fire-fighting Authorities in the three countries, as well as issues of compatibility of the operational structures and their alignment to European Union norms.

6. They discussed issues of forest fires pertaining to the wider Prespa area in the three countries.
7. The Mayor of Prespa, Greece and the Mayor of Resen, the FYR of Macedonia, noted that the contacts between them and the Mayor of Liqenas, Albania have been frequent, and they expressed their wish that the consensus between them be used as an example in other regions and other areas of cooperation. The Mayors expressed the view that the future of their cooperation lies in the Prespa Park process and hailed the efforts for cooperation between the Fire fighting Authorities.
8. The Participants acknowledged that in the age of globalisation, fire-fighting cooperation is inevitable, and expressed the view that Greece as a member state of the European Union will be the driving force for cooperation in the area.
9. They decided to appoint contact persons from the competent Fire fighting Authorities of the three countries, namely the Director of Korcha Forestry Service, the Commander of Florina Fire Service, and the Commander of the Territorial Fire Fighting Units of Resen.
10. The contact persons will prepare reports in order to inform all stakeholders and competent authorities on the relevant steps of the cooperation.
11. Finally, the Participants thanked the Society for the Protection of Prespa for organising the working meeting, the Municipality of Prespa, Greece, for its hospitality, and the International Development Cooperation Agency (Hellenic Aid) of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs for its financial support.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Albania:

1. Mr. Kristaq Shore, Korcha Forestry Service
2. Mr. Spase Shumka, Protection and Preservation of the Natural Environment in Albania - PPNEA

Greece:

1. Mr. Panagiotis Skyrianos, Regional Command of Fire Services of Western Macedonia Region
2. Mr. Constantinos Tsermentselis, Fire Service of Florina
3. Mr. Ioannis Kapakis, Fire Corps Headquarters
4. Mr. Lazaros Nalpantidis, Mayor of Prespa
5. Ms. Myrsini Malakou, Society for the Protection of Prespa - SPP
6. Mr. Miltos Gletsos, Society for the Protection of Prespa - SPP

The FYR of Macedonia:

1. Mr. Zarko Stanoevski, Directorate for Fire Protection, Ministry of Internal Affairs
2. Mr. Trajko Todorcevski, Directorate for Fire Protection, Ministry of Internal Affairs
3. Mr. Sotirce Tanovski, Territorial Fire-fighting Unit, Local Self Government Resen
4. Mr. Dimko Toskovski, Mayor of Resen
5. Ms. Daniela Apostolovska, Municipality of Resen