

Fire on abandoned agricultural land near Omiš and forest fire on Dinara

Two major wildfires marked this year's fire season in the Republic of Croatia. Although both fires are included in forest fire statistics, their characteristics are completely different. Their analysis confirms the well-known views of the forestry profession on agricultural land management, forest management and fire prevention. Foresters reiterate these views year after year. Unfortunately, with the first autumn rains, everything is forgotten until the next fire season.

The fire near Omiš broke out on 13 August. It devastated the western slope of Omiška Dinara, from the village of Lokva Rogoznica to the town of Omiš, over an area of approximately 1,000 hectares. It claimed human lives and caused material damage estimated at EUR 110 million. A fire of similar intensity burned the eastern slope of Omiška Dinara in June last year. Thus, over the course of two fire seasons, fire swept across the entire Omiš Riviera.

Approximately 90% of the burned area near Omiš is agricultural land. Only a small portion of this land was managed in accordance with its intended use. A large part had become overgrown with Aleppo pine forest that developed through succession as a result of the abandonment of agricultural land. This fire once again demonstrated that, in order to protect agricultural and forest land from fire, one of the most effective measures should be the enforcement of the provisions of the Agricultural Land Act. The Act stipulates that agricultural land must be maintained in a condition suitable for agricultural production by preventing it from becoming overgrown with weeds and perennial vegetation, and by preventing a decline in its fertility. The Act provides for financial penalties for failure to maintain agricultural land. The situation is similar with neglected private forests on forest land. If an owner is unable to carry out the necessary silvicultural operations in their forest, the state (Croatian Forests) can undertake them and subsequently charge the owner for the costs. A similar practice was established in 2016 in the private forests of Gorski Kotar following the

catastrophic spread of bark beetles. At that time, the competent ministry issued an Order enabling Croatian Forests to undertake the forest restoration and felling of infested trees at locations where private forest owners could not or did not have time to react on their own.

The fire on Dinara was detected on the Croatian side of the mountain on 14 August, after it had started around 10 August in the area of Bosansko Grahovo in Bosnia and Herzegovina and crossed the border. It devastated approximately 6,000 hectares of forest land. Communities of European black pine, pubescent oak, common beech, mountain pine, mountain grasslands and rocky pastures were burned. The damage has not been assessed yet. Considering only the loss of forest ecosystem services, it can be assumed that the damage is immense.

The fire on Dinara once again demonstrated that the implementation of forest management operations (afforestation, forest regeneration, tending, forest protection, forest maintenance, construction of forest roads and firebreaks) in accordance with management plans has no alternative. Forest management contributes to the resilience and stability of forests, their progressive development, fire prevention, firefighting, post-fire forest rehabilitation and the prevention of erosion processes. Had a network of forest roads been constructed on Dinara in time, firefighters would have had easier access and a greater possibility of containing and extinguishing the fire. Unfortunately, the foresters' proposal to construct a forest road was rejected on the grounds of its harmful environmental impact. Therefore, we are now left with a burned nature park and severely damaged environment. After all, without access, rehabilitation of the burned area is not possible. Will the construction of a forest road now finally be reconsidered? If there were any justice, the ones who previously rejected its construction should now bear the costs of constructing it and rehabilitating the burned state-owned forest on state-owned forest land.