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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	The strategic importance of agriculture and sustainable forest management in strengthening wildfire risk prevention and resilience - Information from the Commission - Exchange of views

The Communication from the Commission on *Integrated Wildfire Risk Management* (doc. 7652/26) addresses ecological, economic, cultural, and social dimensions across the full risk management cycle (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery). It serves as a response to the urgency to act on wildfire risk management, bringing all policy areas and actors together in a joint approach to reduce wildfire risk. It builds on consultations with EU institutions and bodies, Member States, experts, stakeholders, and academia and aims to strengthen cooperation with them to address growing challenges on wildfire risks.

Wildfires in the EU are increasing in scale, frequency, and destructiveness, creating significant cross-sectoral risks. For the 2025 wildfire season, records indicate that over 1 million hectares in the EU have been burned, an area bigger than Cyprus. This sets a historic high for wildfire-impacted territory in the EU. In four of the last five years, burned areas have exceeded the historical average, with fire intensity also rising. Wildfires are no longer limited to southern Europe but are also affecting central, northern, and eastern regions of the continent. This trend has wide-ranging consequences, including loss of life, damage to ecosystems, reduced air quality, soil degradation, erosion, biodiversity loss and negative impacts on agriculture, forestry and infrastructure. The EU annual economic damage resulting from wildfires is estimated at around EUR 2.5 billion.

Climate change is a major catalyst for more frequent heatwaves, droughts and high temperatures, creating conditions which favour the ignition and spread of wildfires. Changes in land use, degradation of natural ecosystems, rural depopulation and abandonment of traditional practices have led to increased fuel accumulation. At the same time, urban expansion into forested areas has increased exposure to wildfires. Human activity accounts for up to 96% of wildfire ignitions, making it their primary cause. Wildfires are commonly caused by infrastructure-related sparks or deliberate actions.

The accumulation of fuel due to unmanaged vegetation increases the likelihood of large wildfires. Therefore, farmers, foresters and rural communities play a crucial key role in preventing wildfires. Active and sustainable land management practices such as grazing, forest thinning, species diversification and the promotion of more diverse landscapes are important in reducing wildfire intensity and slowing down the spread of fires.

The EU provides funding sources for prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Improved tracking and strategic use of these funds are needed to ensure effectiveness. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been supporting land-based wildfire prevention and restoration. The currently available instruments, including those dedicated to restoring forests and agricultural land after natural disasters, are proposed to be continued for the programming period 2028-2034. Other measures such as nature restoration, including in wetlands and forest areas, also contribute to fire resilience by improving the health of the relevant ecosystems and reducing drought effects.

Member States bear primary responsibility for managing wildfires, along with regional authorities and land managers, while the EU provides support through funding, data, and knowledge sharing.

The current challenges that obstruct the effectiveness of our wildfire prevention policies include inconsistent data, outdated hazard maps, suboptimal modelling of evolving fire behaviour and limited integration of cross-border and multi-risk assessments.

To that end, EU tools are already available for monitoring and early warning services, such as Copernicus and the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) and Member States are encouraged to make systematic use of them to support wildfire risk management and to help them decide which projects need funding. The Commission aims to enhance these tools and develop standardised risk modeling at the EU level. Member States are encouraged to promote the uptake of land-based wildfire prevention measures and to improve early-warning systems, fire monitoring, fire behaviour modelling, risk assessment and the use of high-resolution data for decision-making.

Given the high degree of wildfires caused by human activity, behavioural change is critical. Access to risk information and targeted communication can support prevention efforts. Preparedness measures include evacuation planning, community engagement, and education.

Some regions lack sufficiently trained personnel and equipment. Firefighters require appropriate protection, training, and support. The EU encourages responsive measures to be taken through the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, including pre-positioning of firefighters and the development of a shared aerial firefighting fleet (rescEU). Additional efforts focus on improving interoperability, training, and analytical capabilities.

Recognising the need for further action on this issue and considering the Commission's Communication on *Integrated Wildfire Risk Management*, the Cyprus Presidency aims to facilitate the work on the Recommendation on integrated wildfire management announced by the Commission in its above-mentioned Communication. Given its cross-cutting content, the Recommendation will be discussed under the General Affairs Council. Bearing also in mind the importance of strengthening the link between prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, as well as the support provided through EU and Member State actions for effective implementation, the Presidency invites Ministers to exchange views on the following questions to contribute to this process:

- *How can the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), in combination with other EU instruments, better support farmers, foresters and rural areas in preventing and managing wildfire risks, including through stronger incentives for land management practices that reduce fuel accumulation and enhance landscape resilience? How can this support be further improved through additional public and private funding beyond the CAP framework?*

- *Considering the increasing intensity and frequency of wildfires across Europe, how can sustainable forest management be incentivised and restoration be strengthened, and how can wildfire risk prevention be better integrated into national forest policies, restoration plans and land-use planning, particularly in the wildland–urban interface and areas affected by land abandonment, to enhance resilience and protect rural communities and ecosystems?*