

Mount Athos remains on high alert for wildfire prevention



During the summer period, the fire protection forces in Mount Athos remain on constant alert. The area presents a number of particular challenges that increase the risk of wildfires and make firefighting operations more difficult.

Preparations began early last spring, while, following a request from the Karyes Fire Service of Mount Athos, a military unit carried out inspections of the forest road network, which suffers extensive damage during the winter months due to heavy rainfall. Wherever intervention was required, improvements were made using earthmoving equipment and trucks, while water supply points and water reservoirs were also inspected.

“This year is a difficult one because temperatures are higher, and due to the intense winter rainfall, forest and grassland vegetation has become extremely dense,” said Brigadier General Vasileios Psaltidis, Commander of the Karyes Fire Service, speaking to the Athens-Macedonian News Agency (ANA-MPA). He explained that each monastery patrols its own surrounding area and maintains its grounds, carrying out clearing operations in coordination with the Fire Service. In addition, fire safety measures are implemented within the monasteries, where permanent firefighting systems, water tanks, and fire detection systems—including

room smoke detectors—are inspected, along with equipment storage cabinets and water supply networks. Some monasteries have also acquired water tanker vehicles, both small and large, which are maintained and kept ready to assist firefighting operations.

At the same time, monks receive firefighting training, and this year two exercises were conducted in Mount Athos: one at the Holy Monastery of Iviron and another at the Monastery of Vatopedi, where a volunteer fire brigade unit was officially established last year through a government gazette decree. “The unit consists of 23 people: volunteer monks certified by our service, as well as other volunteers, such as workers employed at the monastery who provide invaluable assistance. Training sessions are held every year and whenever requested. In fact, some ask us to train them every month,” he noted. The training initially focuses on communication with the Fire Service, as well as the appropriate response to every possible emergency scenario.

The particular challenges of the monastic state

Regarding the unique characteristics of the monastic state, Mr. Psaltidis refers to the twenty monasteries and the many holy hermitages scattered throughout the peninsula, its distinctive terrain with major elevation differences between the northern and southern parts, as well as the presence of mineral deposits in the subsoil of the northern region. As he explains, lightning strikes are frequent in this area, often causing fires. He also notes that monitoring visitors is difficult and adds that there is always the possibility of a fire being caused by a lit cigarette.

Concerning this issue, the Karyes Fire Service of Mount Athos has taken preventive measures and communicated with the owner of the Mount Athos ferry lines. On every boat journey, passengers are informed that from 1 May, when the wildfire prevention period begins, until 31 October, when it ends, the lighting of fires anywhere on the Athos peninsula is strictly prohibited. The recorded announcement is broadcast in several languages: Greek, English, Russian, Romanian, and Serbian.

Drones as a protective shield

Drones are also providing an additional layer of protection against fires in Mount Athos. The Monastery of Vatopedi has arranged 24-hour surveillance of its area using a privately operated drone. A drone readiness base has been set up at the Skete of Saint Demetrius, which is also part of the Monastery of Vatopedi. Meanwhile, a camera equipped with three smoke detectors is to be installed in an area overseen by the Monastery of Hilandar.

‘These measures are expected to significantly improve the situation. It will also be beneficial for us to receive immediate notification in the event of a fire, which is expected to greatly reduce response times and dramatically improve firefighting operations,” emphasised the Commander of the Karyes Fire Service.

So far, the situation on the Athos Peninsula has been developing smoothly. The Fire Service has dealt with several incidents and also intervenes in rescue missions and mountain emergencies, as many visitors attempt to climb Mount Athos, which reaches an altitude of 2,033 metres.

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