

ACTIVITY REPORT 2023



SGIFR

Sistema de Gestão Integrada
de Fogos Rurais

INTEGRATED RURAL FIRE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM





1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mitigating the effects of rural fires is an operationally demanding challenge, as is the governance of their risk. This report, **for the fifth consecutive year, is delivered to the Government and Parliament and made available to the public, promoting scrutiny and discussion of the results of the Integrated Rural Fire Management System (SGIFR) and the National Action Programme 2020-2030.** Comparing the targets and the expected physical and financial indicators against those achieved in 2023, this report also includes a set of recommendations for better decision support.

As identified in 2017, the problem of fire is a **critical societal challenge for the viability of the territory**: faced with the biggest natural disaster in democratic Portugal that year, the country recognised the operational difficulties, context, socio-economic causes and complexity of the problem. Parliament unanimously approved the recommendations of the two Independent Technical Commissions that proposed a model anchored in the Centre of Government and supported by specialisation, professionalisation and prevention/suppression integration. The XXI Government, then in office, took the proposed, long-term direction and considered this issue to be top priority, which continued so by subsequent governments, despite other critical challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

In the wake of these severe fires and their consequences, the country mobilised in a **coordinated manner, reacted with operational focus and also with strategy.** Between 2018 and 2021, it was critical to ensure the articulation of various entities, correct operational weaknesses, while simultaneously approving a strategy with four guidelines: (i) Adding value to Rural Spaces, (ii) Taking Care of Rural Spaces, (iii) Modifying Behaviours and (iv) Managing Risk Efficiently, emphasising enhancement in the areas of governance and prevention. The targets, the functional model and the SGIFR were also approved, which assigned competences to the entities and defined their work processes, reorganised mandates and agents and co-created an action programme involving more than 10 ministries and 80 entities.¹

¹ cf. RCM 157-A/2017, of 27 October; DL 12/2018, of 16 February; RCM 20/2018, of 1 March; RCM 45-A/2020; RCM 71-A/2021, of 8 June and DL 82/2021, of 13 October.



With greater coordination, organisation and management – in short, **better governance** – the process of registering properties north of the Tagus river was strengthened, the danger was assessed and mapped in order to prioritise the initiatives of key public institutions, which were meanwhile empowered with staff, knowledge and equipment. In 2023, decentralised polycentric governance was consolidated, which approved 5 regional plans and scaled 23 sub-regional programmes with contributions from municipalities (6 approved sub-regional programmes).

Meanwhile, **the National Action Programme (PNA) 2020-2030 has 87 % of projects underway (84 out of 97) and two already completed.** Between 2020 and 2023, this Programme advanced to 39 % of the planned initiatives, with reference to the 97 projects. The best performance of the PNA was concentrated on the axes of ‘caring for rural spaces’ and ‘managing risk efficiently’ with 48 % and 43 % of progress, respectively.

Important objectives were also achieved with the land use monitoring system (SMOS) and with the registry (28 % of the registered area of 152 municipalities, with more than 2 million records), but in 2023 it was not yet possible to estimate the value in euros of all the damage and losses caused by the fires, despite progress already made in this area.

Communication and deterrence and the actions of local authorities were decisive in changing the population's behaviour and helped reduce the likelihood of fires. Clearing vegetation around houses and traffic routes, along with timely warnings, allowed safe evacuations during the most critical fires, but are continued in order to achieve gains in suppression effectiveness and efficiency.

Under a rationale of **continuous improvement of processes**, the fires of 2022 and 2023 were now analysed using the lessons learned methodology,² looking at the capacity built since 2021, with identified gains in effectiveness and also efficiency that require innovation, review of stimuli and instruments. The SGIFR 2022 report³ recommended, in this regard, that the political power and the leaders of entities focus on reviewing the work processes of the public administration and the quality of decisions, given the technical and scientific knowledge available in the meantime.

This effort to mobilise knowledge, which enabled the advances reported above, was reinforced in 2023 with **easier access to international knowledge.** In addition to the close relationships and projects involving Spain, Finland, Chile and Australia, 3 memorandums of understanding

² <https://www.agif.pt/pt/relatorio-das-licoes-aprendidas>

³ <https://www.agif.pt/pt/relatorios-nacionais>



were signed (United States of America, Canada and Brazil) and the 8th 'International Wildland Fire Conference' was held, with more than 1 300 participants from more than 80 countries.

Since 2020, investment in prevention has been higher than investment in suppression. Between 2018 and 2023, the expenditure of the Central State Administration totalled 2.5 billion euros, and compared to 2017 it increased threefold, equivalent to 9 times higher in prevention and 2 times higher in combat. However, after 5 years (2018 to 2022) of consecutively reinforcing prevention budgets, avoiding the suppression pitfall, **we can now indicate that in 2023 this trend has reversed**, with 62 million euros less invested in prevention, due essentially to a reduction of 58 million euros in agricultural support (transition period from PDR2020 to PEPAC), and an extra 16 million euros in response, by reinforcing air resources and permanent intervention teams. As a consequence, **the weight of prevention represented 54% in 2023, 6 percentage points less than in 2022** - in the opposite direction, therefore, to that defined strategically, in which the valorisation of the territory and its management constitute the necessary axes for changing the context.

Overall, in 2023, **the Central State Administration's expenditure on the SGIFR was 483 million euros – 46 million euros less (-9 %) compared to 2022.**

This performance has enabled civilian fatalities to be avoided in the last 6 years, while the number of fires is now half (-58%⁴) and the area burned has fallen to a third of the historical average⁵.

It can be seen, therefore, that **the overall targets of the National Plan are in line with expectations**: in 2023 there were no fire victims, the annual accumulated burned area remained below 66,000 hectares and the percentage of fires covering more than 500 hectares is less than 0.3 %, even with the reduction in the total number of fires.

It is also worth noting the international visibility of these results, among similar countries in Europe, America and Oceania, as well as the United Nations, the European Union, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, recognising Portugal as an example, highlighting

⁴(2023 compared to the 2010-2019 period)

⁵(2023 compared to the 2001-2017 period)



strategy and results, which are beginning to be documented in scientific analyses, demonstrating that our country is less vulnerable to changes in interannual weather conditions.⁶

Despite the results and the solidity of the path taken, it cannot yet be said that the country is 'protected from serious rural fires' (cf. 2030 vision from the approved plan), since 14 of the 20 targets from the strategic guidelines have yet to be achieved.

Although **necessary advances have been made in planning, prevention, preparation, and mitigation, intervention in the territory still does not take place on a sufficient spatial scale.** Without this scale – in the order of 300,000 hectares of permanently managed vegetation, defined in the PNA – henceforth, Portugal and the Portuguese people are faced with the **fire paradox**: by being very successful in reducing the number of fires and the burned area, without actively managing the post-fire, namely in 2017, and without intervening with scale in the remaining green area, we have allowed the accumulation in the last 6 years of fine, shrubby and arboreal vegetation that will fuel faster and more severe fires that can burn more than 750,000 hectares⁷ in a single year and/or destroy unique sites and threaten important infrastructure and urban communities.

It is true that **the probability of fires has been reduced, disaster has been avoided and time has been gained**, but it is critical **to gain scale of action by mobilising landowners, producer associations, companies and municipalities** so as to add another 200,000 hectares/year of area managed using forestry, pastoralism and controlled burns, supplementing the almost 86,000 hectares of strips and mosaics managed by ICNF, IP, and utilities companies. It is also important to recover the pace of implementation of the “Safe Village, Safe People” programme, which in 2023 covered only 12 additional villages, for a current total of 2,242 villages (compared to the target of 7 000 for 2030).

As previously mentioned, although there are positive results and much-needed progress has been made, **danger will persist in the absence of political determination to coordinate, accelerate and execute the Programme.** In fact, **at the current pace of implementation of the PNA and the SGIFR, it will not be possible to achieve the targets set for 2030.** There is a long delay in projects enabling changes in the behaviour of economic agents (e.g. undivided ownership and the income of forest and livestock owners), and in the ability to secure dedicated funding for

⁶ Municipal Council, submitted 2024

⁷ Prospective PNA 'Black Sky' scenario



sub-regional action programmes with commitments to intermunicipal communities, as well as in the revision of work processes in favour of efficiency and improving the quality of technical decision-making and investment. It is therefore necessary to:

- Remunerate owners for the value of the assets (wood and non-wood) and services produced, and reward those who (re)invest in or care for the urban/rural interface;
- Strengthen fiscal, financial and mutualist incentives to mobilise landowners, forestry producer organisations and companies;
- Change the succession regime process so that shares do not remain undivided indefinitely;
- Ensure better governance of forest resources, balancing the relationship between agents, penalising the accumulation of post-fire vegetation (e.g. major fires in 2017) and ensuring active management after forest exploitation;
- Promote robust risk reduction and transfer mechanisms using insurance;
- Valorise the pastoral, milk, meat and leather sectors, through an extensive livestock farming programme;
- Encourage the Public Administration to acquire knowledge and be rewarded for innovating/saving.

It is also necessary to **reinforce the governance dimension of the SGIFR:**

- Resume regular cycles of political monitoring of the PNA at the national level, which would make it possible to increase its implementation rate, coordinate and articulate agricultural, forestry, livestock, energy and environmental policies, and articulate the work plans of SGIFR entities and their annual budgets;
- Along these lines, and **as proposed by the OECD, it is crucial to dedicate a line of funding to the SGIFR, namely to implement projects identified and sized by the municipal commissions**, which would allow entities to be mobilised for their implementation;
- **Establish programme contracts with local private partners** - as provided for in the PNA, it is necessary to review the law on funding local authorities, increasing funding for those which commit to prevention initiatives (in the forest or at the interface) and also to review the criteria for funding associations that own fire departments and forestry producer organisations;
- Qualify and accredit key decision-making positions in prevention and combat processes: it is essential to **approve the SGIFR National Qualification Programme, drawn up at the end of 2021 with an estimated budget of 7 million euros**



In global terms, it should also be noted that the continued implementation of the SGIFR and the achievement of its targets will enable Portugal to continue to reduce the impacts of rural fires on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), contributing to air and water quality and employment (SDGs 3, 6 and 1) with 2.5MtonEq Co₂ already avoided, and also contributing to the Roadmap to Carbon Neutrality 2030 commitments.



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