

Forest wildfires:

Has the effectiveness of reforestation programmes been studied and monitored?

The recurring destruction of forests and forested areas, especially in summer, constitutes a major environmental problem, baring severe consequences on ecological balance and biodiversity, as well as on people's lives and property. For this reason, the restoration of damaged forest ecosystems and the artificial forest reestablishment whenever natural regeneration is not deemed to be sufficient, is of significant priority to the State; hence, multiple public resources are made available, including EU funding.

This audit tangled mainly the question of these funds' rational use and result yield. It also tangled the topic of the adoption for restoration and reforestation, in other words, the assumption of the cost and responsibility for carrying out the necessary restoration and reforestation projects in public forested areas, by individuals who express interest and are selected for this purpose.

The audit identified the following findings:

1. The General Directorate of Forests and Forest Environment, although responsible for the implementation of the National Forest Strategy and the policy of reforestation in Greece, does not have reliable overall data neither on the areas declared as reforesting across the territory, nor on the areas requiring reforestation, according to scientific principles; as a consequence, the available public resources for reforestation are occasionally allocated.
2. The fact that the design the action of the Rural Development Programme 2014 – 2022 related to reforestation was too ambitious, combined with the immaturity of the projects and the complications from the transfer of regional forestry services to the Ministry of Environment and Energy while the Programme was ongoing, resulted in this Action producing minimal outcomes, both in terms of absorption of the available funds and achieving the objective of the surfaces to be reforested.
3. Despite the lack of formality, regarding the selection of restoration and reforestation contractors, and the partial, to some extent, supervision of the contractors' compliance with their obligations by the competent forestry authorities, the new sponsorship system accelerated the execution of reforestation projects. In certain cases, however, the public funds intended for reforestation projects, which were ultimately carried out through sponsorship, were not released in a timely manner.
4. Over time, far fewer reforestations than planned are carried out. The restoration of the forest environment in the damaged areas, as a long-term result of the reforestation works, is not monitored and, therefore, cannot be confirmed.