



For immediate release

João Branco, Quercus, +351 93 77 88 472, joabranco@quercus.pt
Hannah Mowat, Fern, +33 6 79 11 80 91, hannah@fern.org

NGOs call for policy changes in the wake of Portugal's forest fires

Brussels, June 22 – Five days after the deadly wildfires in Eucalyptus Plantations Pedrógão Grande in central Portugal claimed 64 lives, two leading forestry campaigning organisations, Quercus (based in Lisbon, Portugal) and Fern (based in Brussels, Belgium), call on the EU to examine how their policies and subsidies have driven the Portuguese plantation model and adapt them where necessary.

Decades of forest policy failure in Portugal

Quercus points to policy and management failures by successive Portuguese governments, which over many years have failed to get to grips with problems created by the rapid expansion of eucalyptus plantations.

“Forest fires are considered the greatest environmental problem in our country, but successive governments have failed to approve or implement the long term policies needed to promote sustainable forest management and increase resilience to fires”, said Domingos Patacho, senior forest campaigner at Quercus.

“EU sources of funding such as payments to Portuguese farmers under the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy and payments from UN agencies should not any longer be used to increase monoculture eucalyptus plantations.”

In response to the latest fires, the government has promised to approve a new law to restrain future planting of eucalyptus by the end of the summer.

Quercus says this has to be just a first step on the long road to overcoming decades of mismanagement and neglect. It wants to see government support for rural communities that goes beyond growing eucalyptus, with much greater emphasis on sustainable management and local species.

Implications for EU climate change policies

Fern says the deadly forest fires in Portugal have exposed the potential pitfalls of schemes that seek to mitigate climate change through planting new forests.

“The speed at which vast tracts of Portuguese forest were destroyed demonstrates that you only get resilient forests, capable of storing carbon over the long term, if serious attention is paid to biodiversity and wider community needs, rather than only carbon and timber”, explains Hannah Mowat, climate campaigner at Fern.

“It also shows how easily forest carbon can be released – this is one of the main reasons they cannot be relied on to offset industrial emissions.”



The EU is currently discussing its Effort Sharing Regulation which will set binding emissions reduction targets for EU Member States. One proposal is that governments be allowed to use carbon credits earned by planting new forests such as those in Portugal to offset 280 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions produced from sectors such as transport, agriculture and buildings. Tragedies such as that which has happened in Portugal show why plantations are not able to guarantee long-term emissions reductions and why biodiversity needs to be a key consideration in upcoming climate negotiations.

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Background information

Eucalyptus trees are an introduced species. They are mainly grown for the pulp and paper making and are an important source of income in rural areas. The problem is that [eucalyptus burns much more easily](#) than species native to Portugal such as pine, ash and cork oak.

Portugal is one of Europe's most heavily forested countries. [Forests cover 35 per cent of the land area](#), a quarter of which is taken up with eucalyptus. Forest fires have become a more serious problem since the 1980s, according to a [recent report by the European Academies Science Advisory Council](#), with an area of forest the size of 106,000 football pitches going up in smoke each year since 2000. In the summer of 2003, an area the size of 425,000 football pitches burnt, and 21 people died. The recent fire that has claimed three times as many lives has already burnt an area the size of 50,000 football pitches.

Tackling the issue of fires is complicated by the highly fragmented nature of forest ownership. Thousands of smallholders, some with tiny plots, control three quarters of the land dedicated to growing eucalyptus in Portugal.

About Us

Fern is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) created in 1995 to keep track of the European Union's involvement in forests and forest peoples' rights and coordinate NGO activities at the European level. We seek a world in which environmental, social and economic justice is fully integrated at all levels and people have a voice in decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods.

Quercus is a Portuguese environmental organisation founded in 1985. It is named Quercus because the Oak (Quercus in Latin) is a species that is characteristic of Portugal despite being increasingly rare. Its headquarters are in the Monsanto Forest Park, in Lisbon.