P248 / Wildfires Governance in Times of Climate Change: Europe in Comparative Perspective

Topic : Governance, Policy Networks and Coalition

Chair : Thomas Aguilera (Sciences Po Rennes)

Second Chair : Damien BALLEREAU (Sciences Po Grenoble)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

At the global scale, the 21st-century world is now defined as the Pyrocene. Across Europe, the risk of wildfires has expanded and intensified over the last 20 years, driven by a combination of global warming, land-use planning decisions, forestry, agricultural and civil protection policies. Large-scale wildfires are becoming more frequent and intense, increasingly closer to urban areas, causing ever-greater harm to human populations, infrastructure and environment.

First in the Mediterranean areas most historically affected, and now everywhere in Europe, the discourse on wildfire risk and policies has evolved. Wildfires are increasingly framed as a structural component of climate change. Although calls for prevention are not new, experts and some institutions now place greater emphasis on prevention over suppression. They also advocate expanding governance to include stakeholders beyond the traditional scope of civil protection, such as experts, farmers, economic actors, and citizens. Yet actual policy change remains largely incremental, suppression continues to dominate strategies and budgets in most countries, and reforms are uneven across countries, territories, and communities, from regions with a long-standing fire culture to newly exposed areas where awareness and preparedness remain limited. Whether these developments amount to a genuine transformation or to marginal adjustments within a persistent suppression paradigm remains an open question. Changes are also observable at the EU level, whose involvement has moved from fire prevention under agricultural policy towards an increasingly operational role in response through the Union Civil Protection Mechanism and rescEU. In 2026, a new integrated approach to fire risk management could emerge, aimed at reintegrating the preventive dimension.

The literature on wildfires is high-quality; however, it is largely dominated by ecology and the environmental sciences, which have tended to focus on fire behavior and management techniques. Such work is frequently conducted in collaboration with practitioners and forestry experts, resulting in a body of literature that is of a very high standard, yet also highly normative and evaluative. By contrast, the study of multi-level governance and public policy regarding wildfire remains emerging and fragmented, with a few rare exceptions and some recent studies that have explicitly addressed issues of governance and framing at the European level.

Yet, we believe that wildfires constitute a particularly promising empirical field for public policy and governance research. Because they cut across multiple sectors, including civil protection, forestry, agriculture, land-use planning, insurance, public health, and urban development. Political science has also key role to play here, by analysing power relations, budget allocations, institutional dynamics, and policy processes.

Our panel aims to explore the history, diversity, and change of wildfire governance configurations, paying attention to both policy outcomes and governance processes. We will also examine how governance arrangements, policy choices, political dynamics, and the actions of policy entrepreneurs shape wildfire risk, and drive or constrain policy change across countries, levels of government, and communities. While centred on Europe, the panel welcomes comparative contributions from other fire-prone regions that can shed light on European trajectories, and more broadly on how public policy adapts to the major risks facing 21st-century societies.

CALL FOR PAPERS

At the global scale and notably in Europe, the risk of wildfires has expanded and intensified over the last 20 years, driven by a combination of global warming, planning, forestry,agricultural and civil protection policies. Large-scale wildfires are becoming more frequent and intense, increasingly closer to urban areas, causing ever-greater harm to human populations, infrastructure and environment.

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The first objective of the panel is to gather researchers working on wildfires within the field of public policy analysis—primarily in political science and sociology, but also, in geography, anthropology, law, management, or economics. While centred on Europe, the panel welcomes comparative contributions from other fire-prone regions that can shed light on European trajectories, and more broadly on how public policy adapts to the major risks facing 21st-century societies. The second objective of the panel is to bring together an emerging community focused on these topics, in order to launch publication and research projects specifically addressing the comparison of public policies and the governance of wildfires in Europe.