



## Portugal without Fires

You will probably have guessed it, but May experienced the highest temperatures for that month since records began, with temperatures reaching 40 C in Beja. This coupled with high winds has provided the conditions that have resulted in the fire risk being raised to "very high" or "extreme" in many parts of the country.

According to the IMPC this is an "extreme value" for the month of May in Portugal, and the highest ever recorded this month in any of the meteorological stations of the IPMA network.

You may have noticed that I did not say that the weather conditions have "resulted" or "caused" the fires, as in reality most fires are caused by human negligence and some deliberately. Some of the worst fires this year have resulted from pasture burning which has taken place illegally and has got out of control.

To put the forest fire situation in Portugal in perspective; over the last 30 years there have been an average of 18,613 fires per year burning an average of 108,334 hectares per year, approximately half the size of Luxemburg.

Last year thankfully was a cooler and wetter year resulting in fewer fires than the previous year; certainly far fewer than in 2012 when there was extensive damage caused by forest fires in the eastern Algarve. During 2012 there were 30,740 fires in Portugal including 772 in the Algarve, although this decreased to 11387 and 446 respectively in 2014.

However all indications are that this year we will have a drier summer with higher temperatures. The fire services have warned that since the beginning of the year up to mid-May there had been a total of 4320 fires compared to 846 for the same period last year so could be one of the worst years for forest fires.

In particular during the period (11th to 24th May 2015) there have been 785 recorded fire incidents requiring the deployment of 10,930 fire fighters and support staff, and 3117 vehicles used, plus 74 air borne missions flown. This is a huge resource for any country and

Although many of the fire have taken place in the central and northern areas of Portugal it was reported on 14th May that a large bush fire had occurred at Ladeira da Nora, near Portimao in the early hours of the morning. This was caused through "burning off", which went out of control. Given the fire risk at the time, burning material is illegal.

### **Phase Bravo - Lead up to the Critical Wildfire Period**

The Government has announced Phase Bravo Special Fighting Forest Fires operation, which is considered the second most critical of these phases. This runs from 15th May to 30th June and mobilizes 5246 personnel operating 1200 vehicles, 34 air assets and 70 lookout posts. During this phase 512 ground surveillance teams, 310 initial attack and 428 combat teams are being deployed.

The various stages within the system are: Alfa (January 1 to May 14), Bravo (May 15 to June 30), Charlie (July 1 to September 30), Delta (between 01 and 31 October) and ECHO (November 1 to December 31).

## **Critical Wildfire Period**

This is the period each year announced by Minister of Agriculture and Sea, where special measures are put in place to prevent forest fires due to exceptional meteorological conditions. During this period **and outside the critical period when there is a very high or maximum risk of forest fire** you are not allowed in rural areas to:

- Smoke, make fires or bonfires,
- Burn agricultural or forest debris
- Undertaking grassland or renewal burning or
- Operate tractors, machines or heavy transport vehicles that do not have fire extinguishers, spark and ember retention systems or flame dampers in the exhaust pipes or chimneys.

In 2014 the critical period was designated 1st July to 30th September and this year is expected to be the same but can be adjusted depending on conditions.

## **Burning fires outside the Critical Wildfire Period**

If you wish to burn debris or pasture renewal burning outside the critical period or when the wildfire hazard is not very high or maximum, you should telephone 117 or your local Bombeiros. You need to check whether this is permissible given the weather conditions in your area. For large areas burning is only permitted after obtaining a permit/permission from your city council or parish contravening this is liable for a fine up to € 60,000.

You should also avoid:

- Periods of strong winds that increase the intensity of the flames, which may ignite surrounding areas,
- Hottest days when debris and pasture are drier,
- Fires in the proximity of trees, piles of firewood, gas containers or other highly inflammable material and overhead electric lines,
- Burning large piles of debris and instead burn several small piles.

To check the daily fire hazard you can contact 117, the Bombeiros, Forestry office, or easier still the Portuguese Weather Institute (Instituto Meteorologia) by internet. The latter shows the fire risk by Municipalities throughout Portugal for the day and following day.

## **Non-compliance with fuel management (cleaning of land) provisions - rights of neighbours**

One of the most frequent questions raised is "what can we do as a neighbour if a land owner refuses to clean their land or cannot be contacted to ask them to do this?"

The law is fairly complex on this subject and readers are advised to initially raise this with your local council requesting that the land should be cleaned.

The law concerning this is in Decree law 124/2006 - 28th June - Section II - "Life and Property Defence - Secondary Network of Fuel management tracks" i.e. cleaning land. Article 15 provisions 2- 5 apply. More details of how to go about this are on our website.

## **Monitoring fires through the internet**

The ANPC (Civil Protection Agency) is the authority responsible for the coordination for dealing with forest fire outbreak. In so far as the Algarve is concerned the ANPC has a coordination centre based in Faro and is manned by staff from other authorities such as the GNR. All major fires are plotted and information updated regularly.

Safe Communities Algarve website under civil protection contains more information on this subject in English along with fire prevention and land cleaning advice.

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