

The importance of Self Protection in Rural Fires

All countries face natural hazards, for example extreme heat, earthquakes or floods. In Portugal one of the high risks is rural fires.

This year up to 31st July there have been 5294 rural fires resulting in 24 680 hectares of burnt area. Compared with the previous 10 years, however, there were 43% less rural fires and 34% less burnt area compared to the annual average of the period.

We all have a responsibility in keeping these figures as low as possible.



Unfortunately most fires are caused by negligence, primarily people burning their land or debris and allowing the fire to get out of control. Some are deliberate, and only 2% resulting from natural cause e.g. lightning.

Fires often occur in isolated places with very limited access. This poses a challenge because unless a fire is contained very quickly, in windy conditions it can spread very rapidly, thereby requiring a massive response sometimes taking days to extinguish – example the 2018 Monchique fires.

Civil protection describes this year's firefighting tactics as a "muscular approach" with maximum use of aerial means right at the onset of fires, as it is recognized that in inaccessible areas firefighters using vehicles or on foot will take time to reach fire fronts.

In these situations and particular during multiple major fires, it may mean that fire fighters are unable to reach isolated properties in areas affected by fires. Knowing what to do in such situations is therefore essential and could save your life.

We often read, for example, that 500 fire fighters are dealing with a fire. Remember however that this is the total deployed, including: drivers, those taking a well-deserved break, those undertaking essential support duties and those helping with evacuations. Those on the front line at any given time are less than this.

Resulting from the 2017 fires there was a clear need for greater awareness among people on how to protect themselves. For example during those fires people left their homes when it was unsafe to do so and tragically died on the roads, others returned to save their animals and also met the same fate.



The Safe Village Safe People program was introduced in 2018 and Safe Communities has been closely involved since then including a visit to Talasnal near Coimbra. Basically it is about protecting villages and people by ensuring everyone is aware of the correct actions to take before and during rural fires. This covers: what to do if a fire approaches your home; if you get surrounded by a fire, if you are confined within a building; what to do if there is a need to evacuate; preparing evacuation kits etc.

For those living in high risk villages, in remote areas including the northern Algarve, the program gives details of alarms that should sound in case of fire, escape routes and assembly points.

There are many actions to take, which can be downloaded in seven languages from the Safe Communities website www.safecommunitiesportugal.com/ruralfires/duringfires . Some of the most important are: to be aware NOW so you act instinctively should a fire occur; during the fire follow the instructions of the authorities, avoiding inhaling smoke by using a wet face cloth, try to remain calm in stressful circumstances and help children and the most vulnerable.

Safe Communities is a qualified Civil Protection Volunteer organisation under Portuguese law and has participated in many Civil Protection exercises. If you would like to volunteer to help, especially those with policing, fire service, civil protection or communication experience, please contact info@safecommunitiesportugal.com

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