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STATE AUDIT OFFICE

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Inefficient and ineffective fire risk management

The system for crisis management and fire protection does not provide for efficient and effective risk management and handling wildfires



The State Audit Office conducted performance audit on the topic "*Crisis management and fire protection system*" in line with the Annual Work Program to answer whether *the fire prevention and protection system in place provides effective preservation of the environment, the health and life of people.*

The outbreak of fires on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia from 2019 to 2021 caused **enormous damage** to the environment. During that period, an area of 29.224,51 ha or 3% of the total forest area in the country was burned and a wood mass of 594.009,68 m³ was destroyed.

2019	
burnt area 15.675,45 ha	burnt wood mass 95.938,20 m ³

↓

2020	
burnt area 1.233,92 ha	burnt wood mass 8.138 m ³

↓

2021	
burnt area 12.315,14 ha	burnt wood mass 490.023,48 m ³

The audit on the legal framework for the **system and national policies for fire prevention and protection**, ascertained slow adoption of strategic and program measures for fire protection and rescue. In addition, development projects are **not foreseen** and there is **lack** of preventive and operational actions, activities and procedures for the participants in the Protection and Rescue System. There is also **uncoordinated approach** at local, national, regional and international level in dealing with natural disasters and other accidents.

National strategy for protection and rescue for a five-year period and annual programs for protection and rescue have not been adopted since 2018. In **2019**, the Government has adopted **National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction**. However, in the period covered by the audit (2019 – 2021) no Action Plan has been adopted.

The **Law on Forests** provides for the obligation to adopt **National Plan for wildfires management**. Even after 9 years since the enforcement of this obligation, the Plan has **not been adopted yet**.

For the implementation of the National Plan, a National Committee should have been established in 2013, and the draft version of the new Law on Forests does not provide for such body.

Pursuant to the Law on Protection and Rescue, there is an obligation to adopt an **Assessment of threats from natural disasters and other accidents at central and local level** prepared by the **Protection and Rescue Directorate**. The auditors point out that the valid Methodology on the contents and method of hazard assessment and protection and rescue planning was adopted in 2006. It does not pay attention to the development section on the method and procedure for the process of mapping, analyzing and assessing risks, and it does not contain timeframe for required update of the assessment.

Similar legal obligation for preparing **Assessment of the threat to the security of the Republic of North Macedonia from all risks and dangers** is also prescribed in the Law on Crisis Management. The auditors consider it necessary for the competent institutions to undertake activities to **review** the need of two separate methodologies for the same types of risks and two assessments with almost identical contents.

In the **National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction**, it is emphasized that the institutions involved in the crisis management system and the system for protection and rescue do not act in sync and there is dualism, rivalry and incoordination when acting in emergencies, which affects the efficiency of the crisis management system.

Full conditions for prevention and early warning in case of wildfires, timely operational action for putting out wildfires, as well as measures for reducing and remediation of consequences from fires and restoration of the environment are not provided.

Decree on alarm signs, method and procedures for alarming and actions of the population was passed in 2018, but it is **not applicable**, because the **system for informing and alarming** is from 1980 and is **not functional**.

The audit found differences in the amount of fee provided for by the **Decree on the amount and method of realizing the fee for citizens in the performance of rights and duties in protection and rescue**. It defines the percentage for calculation of the fee for persons engaged in the rapid response teams according to their titles, but the basis for calculating the percentage has not been determined.

The method of financing the activity of **Territorial Fire Fighting Units (TFFUs)** affects their efficient functioning, and the existing **personnel and technical capacities are insufficient**.

The act for systematization of PE "National forests" foresees **250 job positions for forest rangers**. However, due to absence of criteria for allocation, some subsidiaries have **insufficient number** of forest rangers, and in one subsidiary due to the age structure and realization of the right to retirement, next year there will be no forest rangers.

In addition, total number of **firefighters foreseen in all TFFUs is 1.423**, and the current number of firefighters is **994¹**. The audit ascertained that the legal regulation does not define the number of professional firefighters according to the size of the area covered by TFFUs, degree of danger from fires, type of buildings to be protected, number and size of TFFUs in legal entities and number and size of volunteer firefighting units.

Inadequate training of the protection and rescue forces also **reduces the efficiency** of institutions in dealing with wildfires.



¹ Source: Information on the needs and Action Plan for increasing the efficiency of the protection and rescue system in dealing with fires in the upcoming season

The persons who manage actions for extinguishing fires are obliged to pass professional exam for **manager of action for extinguishing fires and saving people and property**, in accordance with the corresponding Training Program, within three months from the day of acquiring that capacity. The exam is taken before a Commission formed by the director of Protection and Rescue Directorate. During the audited period the Commission has not been active.

With the entry into force of the **Law on Firefighting in 2017**, TFFUs have been decentralized and transferred from the Ministry of Interior **under jurisdiction of the municipalities**. Therefore, part of the financial resources for salaries and allowances continued to be provided from the budget of the Ministry of Interior. From 2019, by Decision of the Government, these funds are transferred through the account of the Ministry of Defense.

According to current legal obligations, the **municipality is obliged to provide funds for salaries of firefighters when hiring additional firefighters from its own budget**. This legal provision for municipalities that have lower revenue is a limiting factor for hiring firefighters and it can have **unfavorable effect** in case of need of quick response and timely prevention of wildfires.

Due to ascertained **inconsistencies** in the compliance with the legal obligation for **increasing salary** of professional firefighters due to the type and nature of the work they perform, some firefighters have started **legal proceedings** before the competent courts, which ended with verdicts in their favor. In the period 2017 - 2022, **almost 148 million denars** were paid by the audited municipalities based on **principal debt, court and attorney fees**.

Auditors ascertained similar situation in the **Crisis Management Center**, where due to incomplete compliance with legal provisions for **compensation of employees who performed tasks in shifts and on call duty**, legal disputes were initiated before competent authorities, which ended in favor of the employees. In 2020-2021, on that basis the **Crisis Management Center has paid 9 million denars** for principal debt, interest and executors.

Systemic weaknesses were also identified, relating to the **imprecise regulation** of competences for confirming **realized revenue from insurance companies**, as well as **lack of provision for supervision over payment of funds for extended reproduction** by entities that manage forests in state and private ownership and legal entities for wood trade. The audit ascertained **unpaid 379 million denars into the Budget** of the Republic of North Macedonia on that basis.

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