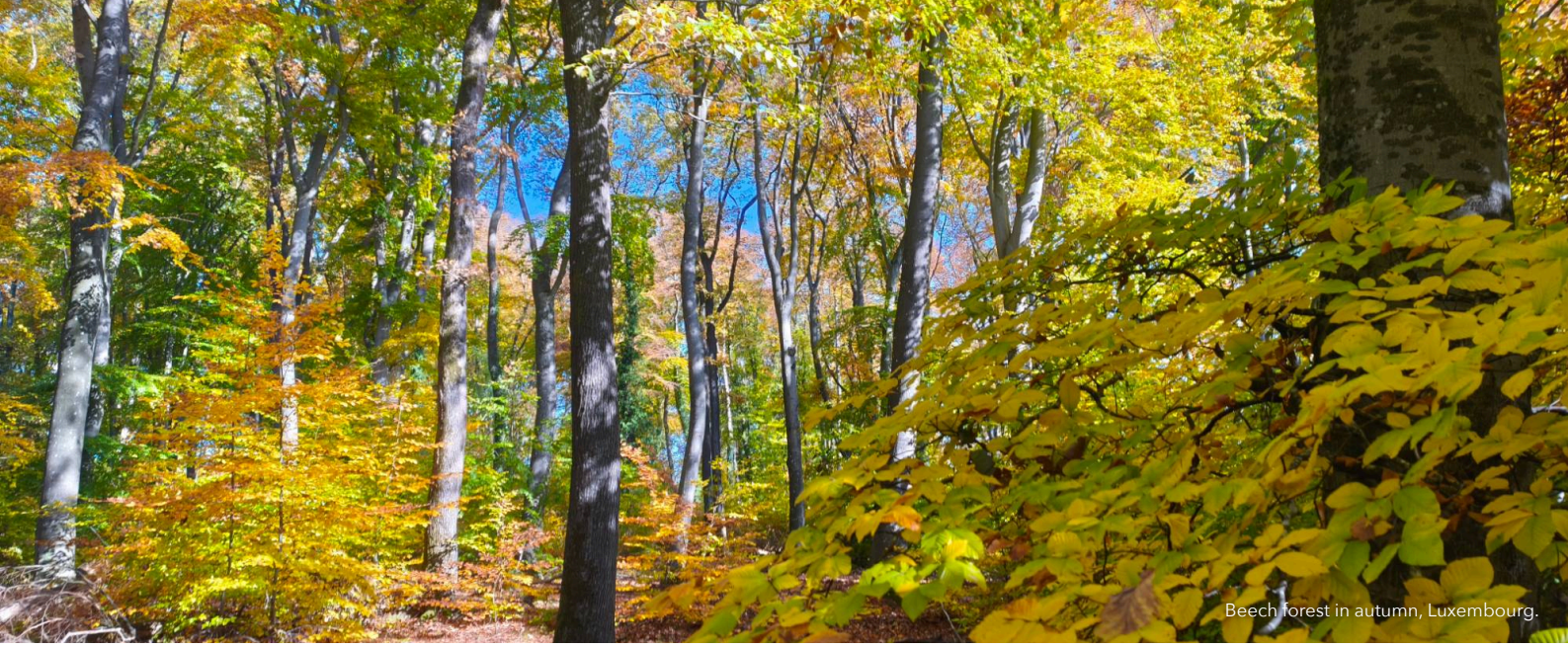


Beech forest in autumn, Luxembourg.

hudson.lu ARTICLE 19/11/2026

Removing bottlenecks to better wildfire prevention and climate-smart land management

Tim Hudson, policy analysis and content creation, Luxembourg

Across Europe and beyond, fragmented landownership adds up to a major bottleneck for preventing climate risks such as wildfires and floods. The next EU funds can already start being planned to help unblock it.

Autumn colours are one of the pleasures of Europe's forests. Yet fallen leaves, dry grass and other vegetation can provide fuel for fires next spring, before new growth appears.

Three recent European Commission articles caught my attention here on Agri-Press this week. One reported the JRC's findings on Europe's record 2025 wildfire season. The others described practical wildfire prevention in Portugal and France.

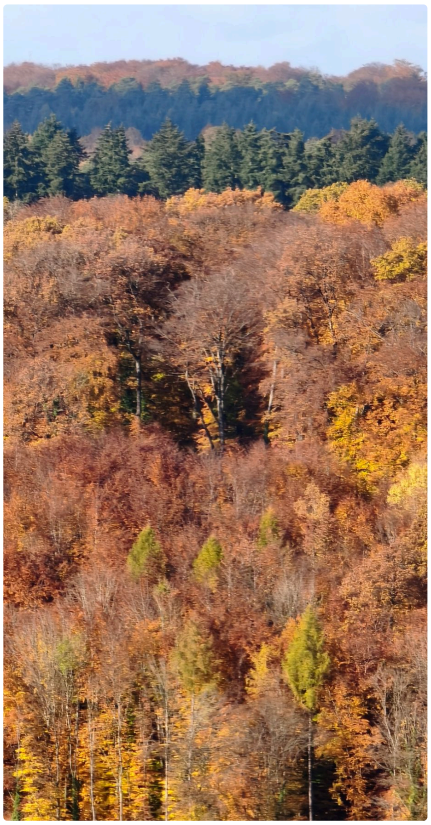
They reminded me of a friend from Greece who made me understand how frightening and dangerous it can be to be caught in a wildfire, as well as the extensive damage I've witnessed while filming the aftermath of rural fires affecting inland Spain.

With more than one million hectares burnt in the EU in 2025, there is good reason to learn from the prevention work already taking place.

One particularly useful lesson from these Commission articles concerns landownership.

Where ownership is fragmented into many small parcels, organising prevention for a whole landscape can take considerable time.

The challenge grows when ownership records are incomplete or the people responsible for parcels cannot be identified. Yet fire does not stop at property boundaries, so prevention has to cross them too.



Autumn forest, Luxembourg. Fallen leaves feed spring fire risks.

Making cooperation easier

Cooperation is an established area of expertise within the EU CAP Network, whose Good Practice database offers useful examples of what can be achieved. In Neuzelle, Germany, a foundation managing around 9 100 hectares established approximately 30 km of CAP-funded natural fire barriers in two years.

In France's Sud-Charente, three municipalities needed around five years to develop 1.7 km of forest road. Landownership, administrative procedures and agreements over maintenance were among the challenges.

Portugal's forest intervention zones and France's forest-owner associations, such as those described in the Agri-Press story from Nouvelle-Aquitaine, provide useful experience in coordinating work on fragmented properties. Around Coimbra, the Horizon Europe-funded RESIST project is helping villages connect and work with landowners to manage vegetation, including introducing more fire-resilient species.

These approaches offer opportunities for wider application, particularly where individual owners lack the resources or practical means to manage their land. Repeated over thousands of holdings, fragmentation becomes a major bottleneck. It is common, and it can block vital work such as fire protection.

What happens when nobody knows who owns the land?

The OECD's 2023 report Taming wildfires in the context of climate change: The case of Portugal found that more than 20% of Portugal's forest land had no known owner, and only 46% was in a land registry.

A missing ownership record can delay a useful intervention, even when neighbouring owners and local authorities are ready to cooperate. In Luxembourg, the cross-border Regiowood project traced 110 such owners more than a decade ago, and LEADER then trained 77 of them to manage their plots.

The OECD describes Portuguese arrangements allowing public authorities to undertake fuel management in certain circumstances where ownership is unknown, subject to national law and appropriate safeguards.

There is also valuable experience from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. Its guidance on responsible land tenure and work on modernising land administration offer ways to improve land information, identify legitimate rights and resolve uncertainty while protecting owners' interests.

> **Identifying bottlenecks early could become routine in planning landscape-scale investments.**

Better land records, local knowledge and appropriate legal arrangements can help establish who decides what happens on each plot, before prevention work such as firebreaks can start.



"If you see a fire, call the free number." Civil protection sign, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italy, co-financed by the EU's Forest Focus project.

Making better use of what we know

More than a decade ago, while working on an EU LIFE film about encouraging farmers to join agri-environment schemes, I became interested in what behavioural science could add to public policy.

Understanding people's motivations and practical concerns can help encourage voluntary participation. Research into collective incentives for neighbouring farmers offers another useful avenue.

European wildfire research is also producing valuable knowledge. The EU-funded FIRE-RES, SILVANUS and TREEADS have explored integrated wildfire management, landscape planning and community engagement.

The LIFE film and Regiowood show these challenges have been known for over a decade. Revisiting such projects now could test their durability and show what the people involved would do differently if they could start again. Their hindsight could save time for everyone planning for the next round of funding.

> **There is an opportunity to connect this research with existing landowner associations, improved land records and the experience of local people who already know their landscapes.**

Preparing now for the next EU funding period

We don't yet know the names of the next EU funds, but we know they will come. Their anticipated objectives can already influence planning, cooperation and the use of existing resources.

> **Knowing the funds will be there in some form helps us start planning for them now.**

For the next generation of CAP, ERDF and international environmental programmes, this could mean earlier support for identifying landowners, facilitating agreements and resolving ownership uncertainties. These activities can be planned and funded as part of prevention projects.

New defence and security funding could offer further scope for fire protection. Fire risks can be particularly acute in border areas next to war zones, where shelling and restricted access can start fires and slow the response. In 2025, Ukraine accounted for almost 30% of all burnt area mapped by the European Forest Fire Information System, more than any other country. In 2024, the JRC found fires there followed the war front.

Such opportunities extend to many policy areas, from fire protection, biodiversity recovery and water management to flood prevention, where interventions often need coordinated action across property boundaries.



"Careful with fire!" Latvian State Forests signs. Latvia borders Russia and Belarus.

Learning from the Ebro Delta

The Ebro Delta in Spain offers another useful perspective on climate risks and small land-plot mosaics. Providing more than 90% of Catalonia's rice, this interconnected agricultural, environmental and water-management system makes cooperation between different interests particularly important.

A 2021 Reuters report described local concern about a public proposal to purchase 832 hectares of private land for coastal protection. It illustrates how decisions about climate adaptation can directly affect landowners, livelihoods and community interests.

The delta is also the kind of place where a proposed territorial digital twin could bring together local knowledge, environmental evidence and institutional responsibilities to help communities and policymakers explore alternative decisions. Digital twinning is a technological possibility that could also help manage wildfire risks driven by climate change. Its scenario modelling could identify where fragmented landownership complicates coordinated action and where cooperation should deliver wider benefits.

These shared benefits suggest opportunities for authorities responsible for forestry, water, biodiversity and rural development to plan and invest together. Better assessment of the wider benefits, including avoided wildfire and flood damage, healthier ecosystems and stronger rural communities, could reveal considerably more public value than individual project budgets show. Making these benefits visible could strengthen the case for shared investment and help people appreciate the full value of public action.

> **A shared pool of public support could become a bigger pool than before.**

Showing that value would help authorities justify shared investment and demonstrate to taxpayers what their money achieves. This is the thinking behind public policy, better valued, where the benefits of public action are counted more fully and appreciated more widely.

The examples shared by Agri-Press, the JRC and the EU CAP Network show how much useful experience Europe already has to draw upon. There seem to be many opportunities to:

- Connect these lessons
- Explore where fragmentation still delays action
- Make the wider public benefits of cooperation more visible for fire and flood protection

Sharing more examples of how communities overcome these obstacles could help others prepare better investments in wildfire prevention, flood resilience and climate-smart land management.

Across Europe, fragmented landownership is a bottleneck for preventing climate risks. Planning now for the next EU funds can help unblock it.

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