

GREEN SPACES

Ministry calls a halt to all construction in scorched areas

Draft law to be submitted next week heralds new approach to forest management



Some 20,000 hectares of land in northeastern Attica were burned in August. Shepherds have been allowing their animals to graze on some of this land. [Yiannis Bardopoulos]



FOUR-LEGGED FOE OF REFORESTATION

The ministry will have its work cut out for it in monitoring the situation in forested areas, as at present there are only 41 environmental inspectors, although the law provides for 78.

Although the grazing of goats has been banned throughout Attica since 1993, there are an estimated 80,000 to 82,000 goats in eastern Attica alone, on about 500 livestock farms. These have been spotted grazing on burnt areas of forestland.

Since the August fires, the grazing of all other livestock has also been illegal. There are only 49 forest rangers, meaning that each is responsible for 8,300 hectares (out of the total 350,000 under the jurisdiction of the Attica forestry service). Another problem is the planting of olive saplings in burnt forest, the first step to having the land's classification changed from forest to farmland.

Last year, the Attica forestry services (comprising another 63 forestry scientists in addition to the rangers) found 900 illegally built homes. Clearly the state services are limited in what they can do to monitor and control the situation.

According to environmental and forestry scientist Nikos Chlykas, a team from the Geotechnical Chamber of Greece found that nearly half of the 2,100 hectares destroyed by wildfires in August in northeastern Attica had been burnt not once but two or three times over.

A new draft law announced by Environment, Energy and Climate Change Minister Tina Birbili suspends all construction activity on burned forestland in Attica and other parts of the country until authorities draw up comprehensive forest maps.

The bill, announced on October 26, is due to be submitted to Parliament next week after community consultation (see right) and also foresees the creation of a special state agency to undertake the demolition of illegally built homes on burned forestland as well as the imposition of stiff fines on offenders. However, it does not say what will happen to homes illegally built before the

fires. Essentially, the bill proposes the abolition of a reform introduced in 2003 by former Agriculture Minister Giorgos Drys, under PASOK's previous admin-

The levelers

A bold provision in Minister Tina Birbili's proposed reform is the creation of a demolition agency

istration, which dictated that at least a quarter of any given piece of land had to be covered by trees for it to be considered forestland and merit protection. Birbili's bill seeks to reinstate the status

quo which existed prior to Drys's intervention, when only 15 percent of a piece of land needed to be covered in trees for it be characterized as forestland.

The new bill foresees the suspension of all construction in areas of Attica and another 18 municipalities and communities affected by forest fires. There will be a ban imposed on the issuance of all construction licenses, with the exception of repairs to homes and public buildings destroyed in fires.

A bold provision in Birbili's proposed reform is the creation of a demolition agency that would be overseen by the new ministry's environmental in-

spectors and would have the responsibility of locating and knocking down buildings illegally set up on burned forestland.

The work of the demolition agency is to be backed by the Hellenic Mapping and Cadastral Organization (HEMCO), set up in 1986 under the now defunct Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works Ministry. According to sources, within the next two months, HEMCO is due to start operating a sophisticated system of monitoring forestland on the outskirts of Attica with the aim of reporting back to authorities the appearance of every new structure outside the town plan.

SAVING OPEN LAND

Lawyers criticize forestry bill



Community consultation on the government's new forestry protection bill ended on October 30. The proposals, submitted online, are being processed by experts at the Environment, Energy and Climate Change Ministry, to be taken into consideration in the final draft of the bill to be submitted to Parliament.

In one submission, the Greek Bar Association says the minister, Tina Birbili (photo), is "continuing the tactics followed for years by her predecessors, who systematically excluded representatives of the legal profession from every ministry committee."

They point to what they say are failings in the bill regarding illegally built homes in areas set aside for reforestation and also criticize the fact that there is no reference in the bill to a deadline for drawing up forestry maps or for completing the mapping of the country's forests.

Elafonisos inquiry digs deeper



The forestry service branch in Molai, Laconia, is investigating land transfers on the island of Elafonisos, in the area of Simos-Lefki, which reportedly include some state-owned and forest areas.

Individuals - including the island's community president Haralambos Liaros - who have claimed ownership of these properties have refused to present their purchase contracts for the disputed sites.

Molai forestry service officials have found that in 1965 the state recognized Liaros's ownership of 5.8 hectares. This area has now increased to 7 hectares, and it appears that he has sold several hectares that did not belong to him.

A judicial inquiry also under way into the legality of 140 sales contracts for land in the area is looking into allegations that state land and forest has been sold, reportedly with the involvement of authorities on Elafonisos and a notary public in the nearby town of Neapoli, who drew up most of the contracts, one of which concerns the exchange of a property in Sparta for a 5,500-square-meter plot on Elafonisos.