

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

The Power of Framing: Institutional Policy Entrepreneurship in the EU's Wildfire Risk Management (WFRM)

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Received: 2 July 2025 | **Revised:** 3 February 2026 | **Accepted:** 1 April 2026

Keywords: agenda-setting | European Union governance | layering | multiple streams framework | path dependence | policy framing | wildfire risk management

ABSTRACT

This article explains why the European Union Wildfire Risk Management instruments have evolved since the 1980s, even though the underlying patterns of wildfire events have remained largely unchanged. It argues that these changes stem from competing institutional actors promoting distinct policy frames within the European Union's (EU) multilevel governance system. Using an institutionalist Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) combined with a framing approach, it shows how policy instruments are revised through interactions among actor constellations over time. Empirically, three phases are identified: a preventive market framing in the 1980s; an environmental framing combining prevention and response in the early 2000s; and, since the 2010s, a risk management approach anchored in civil protection instruments with a predominantly reactive focus. The article contributes to MSF scholarship by applying it to the EU and demonstrating how power-based actor constellations, shifting institutional competences, and EU-specific path dependence shape policy change through layering rather than major reform.

1 | Introduction

Between the 1980s and 2024, the European Union (EU) has progressively developed a range of instruments to address Wildfire Risk Management (WFRM). While wildfires have indeed become more intense over this period of time, these characteristics alone do not explain the transformation of WFRM instruments. This article argues that these successive shifts in framing result from changing actor constellations, which reflect strategic entrepreneurship through which actors seek to expand their competence allocation, a particularly challenging endeavor in the EU's multilevel governance system. At the same time, policy and instrument change in WFRM has been, despite the focusing events of extreme wildfires and the change in the framing of both problems and solutions, incremental rather than revolutionary, contributing to the layering mode of policy change.

In the first period, wildfires were primarily framed as market issues, leading to preventive measures supported by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and forestry programs. In the early 2000s, an environmental framing gained prominence, linking wildfires to biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, and climate change. Understanding wildfires as an environmental issue broadened the problem definition and began to challenge the dominance of purely market-based approaches that had led in the past to preventive policy instruments. Since the 2010s, a risk management framing has gradually consolidated. This new perspective has legitimized the expansion of EU civil protection instruments and has embedded a hybrid logic, combining reactive and preventive approaches, into the EU's wildfire policy mix.

This article investigates the conditions under which these successive framings emerged, and examines how these framings

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have shaped the design and evolution of WFRM policy instruments at the EU level. We argue that the transition from a purely preventive orientation to a hybrid reactive-preventive logic has been driven by the convergence of four interrelated dynamics: the opening of windows of opportunity, the strategic policy entrepreneurship of EU institutions and their internal subdivisions, the subsequent redistribution of institutional competences over time, and the constraining effects of path dependence. These dynamics illustrate how problem definitions, institutional rivalries, and the structure of available policy options interact to shape agenda-setting and constrain the direction of change within a path-dependent governance system, leading to the layering of new policy instruments on top of older ones.

To investigate these mechanisms, the article applies an institutionalist approach of the MSF (cf. Bolukbasi and Yıldırım 2022) to the longitudinal analysis of the WFRM, going beyond a simple application. Instead, it seeks to refine the MSF's theoretical architecture by integrating two underexplored dimensions, namely institutional entrepreneurship (Zohlnhöfer et al. 2015) and policy change through path dependency and layering (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Van der Heijden 2011). The analysis focuses on the actor-centered and institutionally embedded processes through which policy frames emerge, compete, and stabilize within a multi-level governance system.

The article advances the theorization of the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) in three significant ways. First, it demonstrates that political institutions are not only structures shaping access, but that they can be active entrepreneurs engaged in the dynamics of framing competition. Second, in prolonging institutionalist MSF, it shows how institutional legacies and prior policy commitments constrain the coupling of streams by narrowing the range of admissible solutions and reinforcing incremental modes of change, hence leading to layering more than to policy change in the EU. Third, it extends the analytical reach of the MSF by showing how shifting competences among multilevel EU institutions influence frame consolidation, in other words, how in such multilevel settings, path dependence favors incremental change, or layering, over major shifts.

By foregrounding these dimensions, the article strengthens the MSF's capacity to account for non-linear, negotiated forms of policy change in fragmented and multi-level governance systems. It offers both empirical leverage for understanding EU wildfire risk governance and conceptual tools that support cross-case comparison, cumulative theorizing, and future meta-analytical work in the study of policy processes.

The structure of the article is as follows: the subsequent section outlines the analytical framework. The ensuing sections examine the findings across three distinct phases in the evolution of WFRM at the EU level. The concluding section synthesizes the key findings and theoretical contributions.

2 | Analytical Framework

EU policy processes are characterized by institutional complexity, sectoral fragmentation, and their multilevel governance structure, traits that make them resemble “organised anarchies” (Richardson 1997). This configuration renders the MSF particularly suitable for analyzing agenda-setting and policy change in

the EU context (Zahariadis 2008; Ackrill et al. 2013; Herweg 2016b; Herweg and Zohlnhöfer 2022). Over the years, the MSF has been applied across a variety of EU policy domains, including energy (Herweg 2016b; Maltby 2013), defense (Jegen and Mérand 2014), agriculture (Ackrill and Kay 2011), and economic governance (Copeland and James 2014; Sarmiento-Mirwaldt 2013; Saurugger and Terpan 2016).

The case of WFRM highlights the analytical relevance of the MSF for studying policy evolution in multilevel, fragmented, and cross-sectoral domains. WFRM spans multiple EU policy arenas, including environmental protection, civil protection, rural development, research and innovation, and cohesion policy (Aggestam 2024; Plana et al. 2024), and involves a wide range of institutional actors with divergent objectives, problem definitions, and temporal logics (Ratner et al. 2018).

This institutional and policy field diversity contrasts with the more coherent actor constellations assumed by the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Weible 2019; Milhorange et al. 2021) and challenges the episodic logic of the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Baumgartner and Jones 1993), which emphasizes abrupt, large-scale change. In contrast, the MSF provides a more process-oriented lens to policy change. In particular, when applying its institutionalist version of MSF, taking into account how formal and informal institutions influence agenda setting (Herweg et al. 2015; Zohlnhöfer et al. 2015; Bolukbasi and Yıldırım 2022), MSF allows us to study policy change in highly institutionalized and multi-level governance systems such as the EU.

This article applies the institutionalist MSF to the study of the WFRM that the EU has put in place since the 1980s. The approach helps us to understand how both formal and informal institutions shape the politics of policy change. The integration of this perspective leads us to consider institutional dynamics not as contextual variables but as central mechanisms in shaping stream coupling and policy entrepreneurship. Institutions delimit the scope of viable alternatives and define jurisdictional authority, which is crucial in EU studies in particular. Parallel to the tools offered by institutionalist MSF, our study on the EU requires tackling more precisely three specific challenges the EU creates for policy process studies: the strategic use of framing, institutional actors who play the role of policy entrepreneurs, and the path-dependent policy change that characterizes most of the EU public policy transformation.

While the MSF indeed includes an analytical toolkit to explain how actors frame problems and policies to put them on the agenda, combining these explanations with a strategic policy framing approach is necessary for explaining why similar events, in this case wildfires, are leading to different policy solutions over time. A framing approach allows us to examine how competing problem definitions, institutional dynamics, and windows of opportunity have shaped EU responses to wildfire risk. Policy frames are defined as interpretative schemes that shape how actors understand an issue and delimit the range of acceptable solutions (Jabko 1999; Rein and Schön 1996; Daviter 2007; Baumgartner and Mahoney 2008; Saurugger 2013).

Furthermore, scholars have pointed out that the study of policy entrepreneurs in the EU creates a specific challenge. In many MSF studies, institutional actors are relegated to the background, either as passive containers of decision-making or as

intervening variables in policy change (see Bolukbasi and Yıldırım 2022). Only recently have institutional actors found their way into MSF approaches applied to the EU (see Petridou et al. 2025). Policy entrepreneurs have come to be seen not only as lone individuals waiting for the windows of opportunity to emerge, but also as institutional actors such as the European Commission or its units.

Finally, while MSF scholars acknowledge that past policy choices constrain present options, few studies analyze policy change over a long period of time (for an exception, see Zahariadis 1996). This long-term perspective is best captured by the concept of path dependence (Pierson 2000) understood as the constraining effect of past policy decisions and institutional arrangements, which reduces the range of plausible solutions and fosters layering rather than rupture (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). Studying the EU's wildfire management regime allows us to better understand the influence of path dependence in shaping the feasibility and legitimacy of new proposals.

By embedding our study in the institutionalist approach of MSF, our analysis offers a more comprehensive understanding of the processes that have shaped WFRM in the EU. By introducing a framing approach into MSF, which indeed implicitly refers to the framing activities by policy entrepreneurs, it enables us to trace how different frames, such as economic, environmental, and risk management, emerged, competed, and became institutionalized not only in response to focusing events and political windows, but through the active mediation of evolving institutional arrangements and policy legacies.

At its most basic level, MSF identifies five core components: the problem stream, the policy stream, the politics stream, policy windows, and policy entrepreneurs. These operate under conditions of ambiguity, time constraints, and institutional fragmentation, factors particularly pronounced in the EU (Herweg et al. 2023; Zahariadis et al. 2023) and in the WFRM field.

Policy entrepreneurs, defined as actors who invest time, energy, resources, and reputation to promote preferred solutions (Kingdon 1984), play a central role in coupling the streams. While early iterations of the MSF gave limited attention to institutional settings, recent extensions have highlighted how institutional configurations shape entrepreneurial action (Frisch Aviram et al. 2020; Zohlnhöfer et al. 2015; Herweg 2016b; Bolukbasi and Yıldırım 2022).

We build on this literature by conceptualizing EU institutions not as monolithic actors, but as arenas of bureaucratic entrepreneurship (Ackrill et al. 2013; Saurugger 2013; Jabko 1999). In our analysis, the European Commission, Parliament, and Council act as entrepreneurial agents through their directorates-general, rapporteurs, committees, and staff, depending on their mandates and internal power dynamics (Pollack 1997; Franchino 2007; Capano et al. 2025).

In the problem stream, issues are socially constructed as public problems when they are perceived as requiring governmental intervention (Béland and Howlett 2016, 222). In the case of WFRM, this process is particularly complex due to competing interpretations of risk, including ecological degradation, agricultural vulnerability, and civil protection emergencies, within ongoing scientific and institutional controversies (Huidobro et al. 2024; Arango et al. 2024). Problem definition is shaped by indicators (DeLeo and Duarte 2021), focusing on events such as

catastrophic wildfires (Tedim et al. 2020; Fernandes et al. 2020), creeping crises (Boin et al. 2020), and scientific feedback (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Daviter 2007). We argue that the different EU institutions examined, along with their internal subdivisions, do not mobilize the same indicators, causal stories, or scientific claims. Instead, each actor selectively draws on problem stream elements that align with its mandate, priorities, and strategic positioning.

In the policy stream, policy alternatives emerge from loosely coupled communities of civil servants, researchers, NGOs, and consultants (Herweg 2016a). In line with the institutionalist approach of MSF, we argue that EU institutions themselves are embedded within these communities, and that their internal divisions, such as directorates or specialized units, can act as entrepreneurial actors by framing problems to fit preferred solutions and seeking appropriate policy venues (Jabko 1999; Saurugger 2013; Capano et al. 2025).

The politics stream is driven by the national mood, public opinion, political alignments, and institutional opportunity structures (Kingdon 2014; Zahariadis 2015). Changes in political configurations, as well as public opinion measured through tools like the Eurobarometer, shape receptivity to particular framings and influence the timing of political openings (Herweg et al. 2023; Birkland 1997). We further argue that the differentiated distribution of competences across EU institutions and their internal divisions conditions their policy entrepreneurship and its success.

Applying this framework to the WFRM at the EU level, we identify four interdependent drivers of frame change: (1) the emergence of windows of opportunity within the problem and politics streams, (2) the strategic entrepreneurship of European institutions and their internal subdivisions; (3) the evolving distribution of competences between institutions and across their internal departments; and (4) the constraining effects of path dependence, which favor incremental adjustment and the layering of new frames over paradigmatic change. Path dependence is indeed considered to be particularly strong in EU policymaking, characterized by a consensus-seeking governance mechanism that decreases the potential for revolutionary policy change and is famously described as “failing forward” through incremental change and the layering of new policy instruments (Jones et al. 2016). Together, these drivers reveal how contested mandates, shifting institutional configurations, and inherited policy legacies shape stream coupling and frame consolidation.

The analysis contributes to MSF-based theorizing by centering institutional dynamics in agenda-setting and decision-making, and by showing how structural, ideational, and strategic factors jointly shape gradual and contested policy change.

3 | Methodology

This article relies on a qualitative, document-based research design combining longitudinal document analysis and process tracing. Data were collected between September 2024 and January 2025 through systematic searches of publicly accessible EU institutional sources. We first built a hard-law database by keyword-searching the *Official Journal of the European Union* for legal acts containing the term “fire,” without restricting the

search to any policy sector (civil protection, environment, agriculture, rural development, research, cohesion), covering the period from the establishment of the first European Communities to December 2023. Potentially relevant results were retained and false positives (e.g., “ceasefire”) manually excluded. We then traced all cross-referenced and amending acts to reconstruct the full legal sequence.

The resulting legal corpus comprises 129 binding legal acts: 3 founding Treaties and 4 amending Treaties; 22 Council regulations, 20 Council decisions, and 1 Council directive; 9 Commission decisions and 16 Commission regulations; 8 joint European Parliament-Council decisions, 19 European Parliament-Council regulations, and 1 European Parliament-Council directive; as well as 16 Commission implementing decisions/regulations and 10 Commission delegated regulations. Binding acts constitute the empirical backbone of the analysis, as they document when instruments were created/amended, what objectives, obligations, and governance arrangements they institutionalized, and how WFRM-related policies accumulated across sectors. Each act was coded as primarily preventive or reactive following Mourao and Martinho (2019). This longitudinal coding enabled the inductive identification of three periods, marked by turning points in (i) instrument creation/amendment, (ii) the types of tools institutionalized, and (iii) sectoral anchoring and governance logic.

To analyze institutional framing and entrepreneurship, we complemented the legal corpus with documents capturing the positions and negotiation traces of the European Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament, collected from public repositories (legislative procedure files, institutional registers, publicly accessible meeting records) using targeted searches (legislative references, proposal identifiers, document types). The complementary corpus includes 111 Commission documents (proposals for decisions/regulations, Communications, positions on EP/Council amendments, annual reports, staff working documents, and project award/selection materials), 88 Council documents (resolutions, positions on Commission proposals and/or EP amendments, Council/committee press releases, and minutes from the Council and preparatory bodies), and 61 European Parliament documents (amendments tabled/adopted across readings and committee reports). The dataset also includes two European Court of Auditors reports and one ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union.

Systematic manual analysis of this corpus allowed us to identify three major periods of EU wildfire management: an agricultural-economic, an environmental, and a civil protection framing period. We then used the MSF to explain each phase by reconstructing the problem stream (indicators, feedback, focusing events), the policy stream (proposed, amended, or rejected instruments and governance arrangements), and the politics stream (institutional opportunity structures and constraints). Windows of opportunity were identified by tracing document sequences in which stream dynamics aligned to enable the adoption or consolidation of specific instruments. Institutional documents provide the empirical basis for assessing how each institution framed problems, promoted or resisted instruments, and repositioned during negotiations: Commission proposals and accompanying texts capture design choices; Council minutes, press releases, and negotiation documents reconstruct Member State bargaining; and EP

committee reports, amendments, and formal positions trace parliamentary demands. Given the longitudinal scope (1980s–2024) and the institutional nature of entrepreneurship in WFRM, systematic semi-structured interviews were methodologically impracticable. While MSF locates entrepreneurs across multiple venues (Kingdon 1984), entrepreneurship in WFRM is treated here as primarily institutional. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on the Commission (including relevant DGs), the European Parliament (including committees), and the Council/Member State representatives (including the European Council), consistent with EU-focused MSF applications (Saurugger and Terpan 2016; Petridou et al. 2025). Overall, the empirical basis consists of 392 documents, of which 60 relate to 1957–1989, 215 to 1990–2012, and 117 to 2013 onwards.

4 | The First Phase: Market Framing and Preventive Instruments

In the 1950s, WFRM remained national, with strong regional variation. Fires were rare in central and northern Europe but frequent in Mediterranean countries due to dry vegetation, steep terrain, and prolonged summer heat. In the 1960s, rural depopulation in southern Europe shifted practices from traditional prevention (controlled burning, manual clearing) to reactive suppression using off-road vehicles and mechanized response. By the 1970s, aerial firefighting had become widespread, boosting operational capacity while increasing costs.

As the number of ignitions and the extent of burned areas rose across southern Europe, wildfire risk intersected with broader economic concerns, particularly in the context of internal market integration. This shift drew the attention of the European Economic Community (EEC), which began addressing WFRM indirectly through forestry, agricultural productivity, and rural development policies (Moyer and Josling 2002). Preventive measures were integrated into EU programs, including agricultural support, research initiatives, and cohesion policy instruments. This marks the first phase of the EU’s engagement with WFRM, spanning from the 1980s to the early 1990s.

These developments culminated in the first EU legal act explicitly dedicated to WFRM in 1992 (Council of the European Communities 1992). This regulation established wildfire prevention instruments, notably through the co-financing of national projects, with the stated goal of reducing fire frequency and burned surface area (Council of the European Communities 1992).

The analysis of the three streams, along with the policy-making process surrounding this regulation, reveals how the four interdependent drivers contributed to the emergence and consolidation of an economic framing of WFRM.

First, the opening of a window of opportunity within the problem and politics streams enabled wildfire risk to gain salience on the EU agenda. In the problem stream, the Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament converged on framing wildfires as a socio-economic threat, particularly in relation to agricultural productivity and territorial cohesion. This framing was based on material indicators, notably the reported annual loss of over 500,000 hectares of Mediterranean forest (European Commission 1991), which underscored the financial, environmental, and territorial costs of inaction. In the

politics stream, the accession of southern Member States, such as Greece (1981), Spain and Portugal (1986), heightened political attention to wildfire risk. In these countries, high fire exposure, declining agricultural returns, and land abandonment aligned problem and politics streams, opening a window that institutional actors exploited to place wildfire risk on the EU agenda.

Second, the strategic action of these actors was not limited to agenda-setting. Rather, EU institutions engaged in policy entrepreneurship that helped stabilize the preventive framing. The European Commission, particularly the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI), sought to retain control over the issue by framing wildfires as a matter of agricultural and forestry management. This position was strongly backed by the Council of Ministers for Agriculture, which ensured that the legal basis remained within the agricultural domain, thereby sidelining environmental perspectives (European Commission 1991; Court of Justice of the European Communities 1999).

Third, competence distributions entrenched this framing. Despite the Single European Act's expansion of parliamentary powers, an agricultural legal basis concentrated decision-making in sectoral venues, limiting environmental framings and excluding actors without agricultural jurisdiction. In the policy stream, the European Parliament endorsed the Commission's preventive logic (European Commission 1991) while seeking to add an environmental dimension (reforestation and ecosystem restoration) (European Parliament 1992). DG AGRI and the Council nevertheless dominated negotiations, acting as policy entrepreneurs to reinforce a preventive framing aligned with economic and territorial cohesion objectives. The final regulation preserved prevention but remained economically rooted, conditioning EU funding on detailed national plans and constraining alternatives, thereby setting the stage for path-dependent dynamics.

Fourth, an early form of path dependence began to emerge in this period. Regulation 2158/92 constituted the EU's first formal legislative action on wildfire risk, but rather than introducing a paradigmatic shift, it codified a pre-existing preventive logic embedded in agricultural and forestry policy instruments. This contributed to the institutional sedimentation of a specific approach to wildfire risk, shaping the trajectory of future policy developments.

This first phase demonstrates how market framing of wildfire risk emerged and consolidated through the strategic action illustrated through the analysis of official documents by EU institutions and their internal bodies, supported by a favorable window of opportunity, reinforced by a distribution of competences that sidelined alternative venues, and stabilized through early institutional lock-in, laying the groundwork for a path-dependent policy trajectory.

5 | A Second Period: Environmental Framing and Preventive-Reactive Instruments

The second phase of the EU's engagement with WFRM, beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, was characterized by a shift from a purely market-based framing to an environmental one. This new framing did not displace the economic

logic inherited from the previous phase. Rather, it layered environmental considerations onto existing approaches, resulting in a more complex and at times fragmented policy architecture. Preventive measures continued to be financed, but new provisions also allowed funding for reactive measures (European Commission 2010).

These developments culminated in the repeal of legislation specifically dedicated to the protection of the Community's forests against fire, in favor of broader instruments addressing multiple forest-related threats, most notably visible in the Forest Focus Regulation (European Parliament and Council 2003). The analysis of the three streams, along with the policy-making process surrounding this regulatory shift, reveals how the four interdependent drivers contributed to the emergence and consolidation of this new framing.

First, reframing was enabled by a convergence of windows of opportunity in the problem and politics streams. In the problem stream, the ever-existing wildfires were recast from agricultural or rural development issues into symptoms of broader environmental degradation, linked to biodiversity loss, climate instability, and deforestation. This perspective was formalized in the European Commission (2003) communication, which situated wildfires among threats to ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, hydrological regulation, and habitat preservation. The framing echoed global commitments under the UNFCCC, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and UNCED (European Commission 2003), and gained uneven support from the Council and Parliament. In parallel, the politics stream opened institutional space for reframing. The 1999 judgment by the Court of Justice of the European Communities (CJEC) (Joined Cases C-164/97 and C-165/97, *Parliament v. Council*) annulled the 1997 forest fire regulations, for relying on an agricultural legal basis creating a legal rationale to reclassify wildfire risk under Article 130s TEC (now Article 192 TFEU), thereby shifting legislative authority from agriculture to environment (Court of Justice of the European Communities 1999). The expiry of the contested regulations in 2002 reinforced this institutional fluidity and paved the way for the 2003 Forest Focus Regulation. These developments aligned shifting problem definitions with institutional change, opening a favorable window to reframe wildfire risk through a new environmental lens at the EU level.

Reframing during this phase was not solely structural but driven by strategic entrepreneurship within the EU's multilevel governance. Following the CJEC ruling and the legal reclassification of WFRM, several institutional actors seized the opportunity to redefine both its content and logic. Within the Commission, DG Environment recast wildfires within a broader ecological narrative, linking them to climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem degradation. Drawing on international commitments (UNCED, CBD, UNFCCC), it framed WFRM as a long-term preventive issue requiring EU-level coordination (European Commission 2003), thereby positioning itself as a legitimate policy entrepreneur. The European Parliament, newly empowered through co-decision, also acts entrepreneurially: its Environment Committee challenged the agricultural framing, promoted prevention as an environmental priority, and advocated regionally tailored strategies for Mediterranean ecosystems (European Parliament 2003), while calling for a balance between subsidiarity and EU engagement.

Within the Council, the shift of competences from agricultural to environmental ministers signaled cautious support. While endorsing the Commission's integrated approach, the Council favored a broader forest health framework, softening parliamentary ambitions. The resulting compromise diluted WFRM's specificity but consolidated its environmental reframing in the Forest Focus Regulation, institutionalizing a new ecological frame while navigating persistent power asymmetries.

The reframing of EU WFRM was shaped by a redistribution of institutional competences, both across internal departments and between EU institutions. The new legal basis placed wildfire risk under the remit of environmental policy and activated the co-decision procedure, empowering the European Parliament to act as co-legislator alongside the Council. DG Environment replaced DG Agriculture as the lead service for policy design, while within the Council, responsibility shifted from agricultural to environmental ministers (Council of the European Union 2003), and within the Parliament, to the Environment Committee (European Parliament 2003). These shifts reconfigured the institutional landscape of WFRM, consolidating the new environmental framing while opening space for alternative policy preferences to gain formal influence.

At the same time, despite reframing efforts, EU WFRM during this second phase remained shaped by strong path dependencies. The economic and agricultural logic, rooted in national responsibility, subsidiarity, and sectoral fragmentation, persisted. Environmental and preventive rationales were layered onto existing structures, producing a hybrid policy architecture. Wildfire-specific instruments gave way to broader frameworks addressing forest health, biodiversity, and climate monitoring (European Parliament and Council 2003), in line with the 1997, 1999, and 2001 civil protection reforms under DG Environment. The environmental framing merged with, rather than replaced, earlier economic logics. Instruments stemming from the CAP, rural development, and cohesion policy continued to frame wildfire risk through lenses of productivity, infrastructure, and territorial cohesion (Council of the European Union 1999). Funding mechanisms followed suit: both preventive and reactive actions became eligible under rural development funds aligned with climate and energy goals. Research programs adopted the same layered logic, wildfires were addressed within broader environmental risk assessments under the Sixth Framework Program (European Parliament and Council 2002), with later initiatives supporting both prevention and response (Leone and Tedim 2020). This layered trajectory continued. Between 2007 and 2009, wildfire prevention funding under LIFE+ illustrates this development. It dropped to €3.5 million/year, a 61.1% reduction (European Commission 2011a, 93). Member States retained broad discretion, often favoring suppression models over long-term ecological resilience (Leone and Tedim 2020).

This second phase demonstrates that reframing processes in EU WFRM emerged not through paradigmatic rupture, but through the layering of environmental narratives onto existing economic and agricultural structures. While a new ecological frame gained institutional foothold and was supported by legal reclassification, strategic entrepreneurship, and the redistribution of competences, it did not fully displace pre-existing logics rooted in productivity, subsidiarity, and cohesion

policy. Instead, both frames coexisted within a hybrid architecture shaped by institutional compromise.

6 | A Third Phase: Risk-Management Framing and Rise of Reactive Instruments

From 2013 onwards, the EU's approach to WFRM underwent a marked transformation with the emergence of a risk management framing that consolidated reactive instruments across multiple policy sectors. The evolution of the problem framing occurred in the context of institutional changes and led to a policy framing that favored short-term responsiveness over long-term prevention. The adoption of Decision No 1313/2013/EU on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) illustrates this transformation particularly well. The decision allocated €368.4 million to policies combating wildfires, of which 80% was dedicated to reactive instruments, such as emergency response and preparedness, while only 20% targeted prevention (European Parliament and Council 2013a). This reactive trend intensified after the 2017 wildfire season, which acted as a major focusing event (Tedim et al. 2020), and was further reinforced by the COVID-19 crisis, leading to a significant increase in the UCPM, budget to €3.32 billion (European Parliament and Council 2021; European Commission 2024). As of 2021, 95% of the UCPM budget was allocated to response and preparedness measures.

The 2013 shift resulted from a convergence of windows of opportunity in the problem and politics streams, enabling a reframing of wildfire risk at the EU level. In the political stream, three developments were central. First, the Lisbon Treaty established civil protection as a supporting competence (Art. 196 TFEU), authorizing EU coordination without harmonization. Second, Eurobarometer surveys (2009, 2012) showed strong public support for greater EU involvement in disaster prevention (90%) and response (92%) (European Commission 2009, 2012). These figures were strategically used to justify an expanded civil protection role. Still, as Zahariadis (2015) notes, survey preferences rarely generate lasting political pressure, especially for preventive measures with diffuse, long-term benefits (Collins et al. 2013). Third, previous civil protection legislation was coming to an end (Council of the European Union 2007), opening the way to new negotiations. Meanwhile, the problem stream was shaped by recurring diagnoses and focusing events. The Commission identified persistent weaknesses in national response systems: poor coordination, limited resources, and weak solidarity mechanisms (European Commission 2011b). These shortcomings were exposed during the deadly 2017 wildfire season, which overwhelmed national capacities in Portugal, Spain, and Greece (Tedim et al. 2020; Fernandes et al. 2020; Boin et al. 2020). While the European Parliament highlighted climate change as a key driver (European Parliament 2013), the Commission and Council pointed out operational limitations that needed to be overcome. This case illustrates how reframing emerges when shifting problem perceptions align with institutional openings. It also underscores the persistent imbalance between prevention and response in political priorities, reinforcing the MSF's emphasis on the contingent and strategic nature of stream coupling in agenda-setting.

This convergence of problem and politics streams enabled strategic entrepreneurship across EU institutions. DG ECHO, empowered by Article 196 TFEU, positioned itself as a central

policy entrepreneur by leading the 2013 Decision establishing the UCPM (European Parliament and Council 2013a). As the core bureaucratic node for civil protection, it strategically framed the reform around operational effectiveness, advocating for a centralized asset pool and EU co-financing for cross-border deployment. This allowed the Commission to strengthen its coordinating role while sidestepping contentious harmonization debates. The European Parliament also engaged in entrepreneurship, driven by a broader normative agenda. Through its ENVI and AGRI committees, it linked wildfire risk to climate adaptation, land degradation, and social vulnerability (European Parliament 2013). It called for stronger prevention integration and binding mitigation plans, but its influence was limited by the supporting competence and subsidiarity constraints. In contrast, the Council acted largely as a veto player. The shift from environmental to interior ministries in Council negotiations (Council of the European Union 2012) reframed wildfire risk as a security issue. Member States resisted binding commitments and defended voluntary cooperation, preserving a state-led, reactive architecture. These dynamics show how institutional positioning and mandate shaped both the reform's content and the inter-institutional power balance, reinforcing a reactive model of wildfire governance.

Thus, reframing was significantly influenced by a reconfiguration of institutional roles and competences, both between EU institutions and within them. The center of gravity shifted from environmental to civil protection actors. Within the Commission, the leadership for civil protection public policies moved from DG ENV, traditionally focused on long-term ecological considerations, to DG ECHO, whose mandate prioritized short-term emergency response (European Commission 2011b). DG ECHO's operational priorities aligned with those of national civil protection agencies, which replaced environment ministries as the Commission's principal interlocutors. In the Council, the same dynamic was observed with interior ministries who took the lead in negotiations on WFRM, marginalizing environment ministers and further entrenching a reactive framing (Council of the European Union 2012). While the European Parliament maintained a more balanced position, involving both the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) and the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI) (European Parliament 2013), its capacity to shape outcomes was constrained by the subsidiarity principle and the non-harmonizing nature of Article 196 TFEU. This institutional reconfiguration not only redirected the leadership of WFRM towards actors prioritizing operational response but also restructured the dynamics of influence and coalition-building. As a result, the framing of wildfire risk at the EU level became increasingly shaped by short-term emergency logic, reinforcing a reactive rather than preventive policy trajectory.

Once again, the reactive shift in WFRM did not displace earlier framings but was layered onto existing environmental, agricultural, and regional instruments, reflecting path dependence (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). In cohesion policy, the 2013 and 2021 regulations for the Cohesion Fund and ERDF embedded climate adaptation and disaster preparedness as horizontal priorities within broader resilience goals, without altering the structural logic of territorial investment (European Parliament and Council 2013d). In agriculture, the CAP formally acknowledged wildfires as climate risks, yet implementation

remained decentralized. The 2021 reform allowed support for both prevention and response, but maintained subsidiarity, enabling nationally defined, often reactive strategies. In the environmental sector, successive LIFE programs supported wildfire prevention but never made it a strategic priority. Funding remained modest compared to biodiversity and climate lines (European Parliament and Council 2013b). Research and innovation policy followed a similar pattern. The EU's research funding programs Horizon 2020 (from 2014 to 2020) and Horizon Europe (starting in 2021) included wildfire-related calls, but favored in particular emergency logistics, early warning systems, and interoperability, reinforcing the operational turn (European Parliament and Council 2013c). Hence, across these domains, the reactive frame gained prominence not by replacing prior logics but through layered policy adjustments, producing a fragmented yet gradually reoriented regime.

7 | Conclusion

This article has examined how the reframing of wildfire risk at the EU level emerged from the interplay of four interdependent drivers: windows of opportunity, competing institutional entrepreneurship, shifting institutional competencies, and path dependence. These factors not only facilitated the emergence of new frames but also enabled their embedding into legislative instruments and institutional practices. By using an existing institutionalist approach of the MSF and enlarging it to include institutional entrepreneurs, central in the EU context, the article offers new theoretical leverage to understand how framing determines layered and path-dependent policy change in fragmented, multilevel governance systems.

Building on an increasingly developed institutionalist MSF literature, it advances theorization in three key ways. First, it reconceptualizes windows of opportunity not only as temporal openings triggered by focusing events or shifts in public mood, but as institutional junctures, moments when structural or legal discontinuities reconfigure frame viability. For example, the creation of the internal market and the 1992 CAP reform enabled a first framing of wildfire risk as a threat to agricultural productivity. Later, the 1999 ECJ ruling that annulled the 1997 forest fire regulations shifted competence from agriculture (Art. 43) to environment (Art. 192 TFEU), enabling a reframing as an environmental issue.

These episodes show that frame shifts were driven by legal discontinuities that reshaped actor coalitions and recalibrated institutional costs and opportunities. This suggests that windows of opportunity in the MSF should be seen not only as temporal but also as institutional enablers of frame viability, highlighting the structural foundations of stream alignment.

Second, strategic entrepreneurship by institutional actors shaped both the content and instruments of WFRM. Competing Commission directorates, DG AGRI, DG ENV, DG ECHO, promoted rival framings aligned with their mandates: as an agricultural threat, an environmental hazard, or a civil protection emergency. Inter-institutional dynamics between the Commission and the Council further revealed contrasting governance visions: centralized coordination versus subsidiarity-based support. These framings had concrete effects on legal bases, regulatory instruments, and the preventive/reactive policy mix. This confirms that

in multilevel systems like the EU, institutional entrepreneurship is both strategic and structurally conditioned. A framing's success depends on actors' formal competences, procedural leverage, and position within shifting institutional configurations, adding structural depth to the MSF's actor-centered view. Institutional entrepreneurship is particularly relevant in the EU context, seen as a highly legalized political system (cf. Kelemen 2011). MSF has indeed developed means to incorporate institutional analysis in the framework, which is particularly relevant in studies on the EU, which can be seen as an extremely institutionalized political system with less space for informal politics than at the domestic level (Bolukbasi and Yıldırım 2022; Herweg et al. 2015; Zohnhöfer et al. 2015).

Third, the evolution of competence allocation played a key role in driving frame change. The shift in legal bases, from agriculture (Art. 43 TFEU) to environment (Art. 192 TFEU), and subsequently to civil protection (Art. 196 TFEU), progressively redefined both institutional boundaries and underlying policy logics. Internal redistributions, from DG AGRI to ENV to ECHO, reshaped dominant framings according to each directorate's core mandate. Hence, institutions are not static arenas: our study shows how legal and procedural changes redistribute framing authority and reconfigure stream interactions over time.

Finally, path dependence limited radical reframing, instead driving layering and hybridization. Successive framings, market-based, environmental, civil protection, coexisted and accumulated through incremental adjustments to funding tools and policy logics. This adds a temporal dimension to stream coupling, especially relevant in EU contexts marked by inertia and layered governance.

Together, these insights show that framing contests in the EU are not merely discursive but are shaped by legal competences, historical legacies, and multilevel institutional actor configurations. The article has shown that combining institutionalist MSF, focusing on policy change with a historical institutionalist approach focusing on incremental change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010), is indeed crucial for explaining the transformation of policy frames at the EU level. Indeed, applied to the multilevel system of the EU, this study has convincingly shown that two elements should be added to institutionalist MSF. First, while institutions do indeed provide the structural context for action, it is also crucial to focus on their institutional entrepreneurship, strategically pushing their solutions during specific policy windows. This challenges views of institutions as only passive settings, structuring stream dynamics, entrepreneurial agency, and frame consolidation. Second, policy change in the EU is rarely rapid and evolutionary (see also Jones et al. 2016) but mostly based on layering and path-dependence. Despite the fact that MSF is based on the study of significant policy change, this study has shown the potential explanatory power of the combination of institutionalist MSF (Bolukbasi and Yıldırım 2022) with historical institutionalism for policy change in highly institutionalized, multilevel systems. Future research on other policy areas that are concerned by repeated crisis situations would be a relevant field of comparative inquiry.

Acknowledgments

Open access publication funding provided by COUPERIN CY26.

Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The author, Damien Ballereau, is a duty officer at the Emergency Response Coordination Center (ERCC) of the European Commission. The first version of this article was submitted prior to his appointment. The views and analyses expressed are strictly personal and do not reflect those of the European Commission. The other author declares no conflicts of interest.

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