

## Arrest the guilty

A couple days ago, I reported on the wildlife at Mostuéjols, l'Aveyron, the South of France, which burnt 700 hectares of land. To my relief I can follow up and say that the fire has been extinguished and after weeks of scorching heat, it has finally rained, taking down the heat a notch and temporarily diminishing the grounds for other fires to catch on. The juridical aftermath of the fire however sits less comfortable with me. The headline of an article published on August 11th by franceinfo: reads *'Aveyron : l'homme suspecté d'être à l'origine de l'incendie de Mostuéjols mis en examen et placé sous contrôle judiciaire / Aveyron: the man suspected of being at the origin of the Mostuéjols fire indicted and placed under judicial supervision.'*

The wildfire was accidentally started by an agricultural machine that scraped the sun-baked tar and shot fire sparks into the surrounding vegetation which developed into a full blown fire that spread to the Aveyron. Two days after the fire had caught, the man driving the machine turned himself in. Individually taking a fall for a systematic problem.

By now, according to Magali Espaze, deputy prosecutor of Mende, the man has been indicted for 'involuntary destruction by fire of wood, forest or moorland which could create irreversible damage to the environment by violation of an obligation of safety or prudence'. The maximum punishment for such a crime is 5 years in prison. The man in question however, 'benefitting from the assumption of innocence' has been released and put under juridical supervision.

This court case, holding solely the driver accountable, fundamentally displaces the responsibility for the fire. This wildfire should be perceived in a larger context of the heat waves raging through Europe which are inextricably linked to climate change and bear an unmistakable human fingerprint. The fire could have been started by anyone or anything. Driving the truck down a strip of boiling-hot tar must have been like striking a match. The worker merely suffered bad luck, working away in highly inflammable conditions. Driving a truck, not single handedly driving up the temperatures in the whole area.

There is a painful contradiction and contrast between this 'involuntary cause of environmental damage', which is by law prosecutable, while many of the purposeful extractive activities carried out by private companies, driving up the heat that turned the South of France into one of many frontiers of fire, are kept outside of court. It is for this reason that I find this juridical process incredibly performative and dangerous as it manages to drive the conversation the wildfires should spark, precisely outside of the perceived framework.



## Resources

<https://www.centrepresseaveyron.fr/amp/2022/08/10/incendie-de-mostuejouis-un-homme-soupconne-detre-a-lorigine-du-feu-place-en-garde-a-vue-10482358.php>

<https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/occitanie/aveyron/rodez/aveyron-l-homme-suspecte-d-etre-a-lorigine-de-l-incendie-de-mostuejouis-mis-en-examen-et-place-sous-controle-judiciaire-2594820.html>