

Romania's Environment Ministry said on Wednesday that it will investigate how 50 hectares of forest vanished from a national park in the Carpathians, presumably as a result of illegal logging.

Romania's Ministry of Environment has vowed to investigate illegal logging in one of the country's protected national parks after environmentalists reported that 50 hectares of forest had vanished.

The missing forest is located on top of a mountain in the Semenic National Park, in southwest Romania, on the border with Serbia, and was reported by a Romanian citizen who filmed it with a drone.

The Semenic Mountains host the largest virgin beech forests in Europe. Over 4,200 hectares of virgin forest in the region were included in the UNESCO patrimony in August.

But environmentalists, as well as the Forest Guard, say logging is rampant in the region because the authorities have no real management plan for the national park. Such a plan would create control mechanisms and set limits on logging in protected areas and so avoid the complete deforestation of such large areas.

"We have asked the Ministry of Environment to come up with this plan, even after 13 years," Corneliu Sturza, head of GEC Nera, a local environmental NGO, explained.

According to the Timis County Forest Guard, the government agency in charge of supervising logging in the region, the Semenic National Park Administration, received authority only to treat the consequences of logging, "by planting trees to complete natural regeneration, caring for the seedlings and helping natural regeneration".

The Ministry of Environment on Wednesday said the National Park Administration needs to draft a management plan for the Semenic National Park before it is submitted to the ministry for approval.

"Since its establishment, the Semenic-Caras Gorge National Park has never submitted any management plan to complete environmental evaluation procedures ... for approval by the central public authorities," a press release from the ministry on Wednesday said. The press release also said the ministry will set up a team of investigators to look into the case.

Illegal logging in the national park has been a topic of controversy between the Ministry of Environment, environmental organizations and opposition lawmakers who have demanded that the minister start an investigation.

Several tourists have alerted the local authorities to the problem and the regional media exposed the illegal logging that completely the mountaintop bare in just four years.

The deputy speaker of the Romanian Senate, Mihai Gotiu, from the Save Romania Union, has formally asked Environment Minister Gratiela Gavrilescu to explain why so many

hectares of forest have vanished from the national park and urged her to open an investigation.

In 2015, after environmentalists protested across the country against this abuse of the national patrimony, President Klaus Iohannis put the topic on the agenda of the National Defence Council.

According to Greenpeace, almost 10,000 cases of illegal logging were uncovered in 2016, almost half of which citizens reported. The Romanian state lost 9 million euros in 2015-2016 because of illegal logging, the same report said.

Source: balkaninsight