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Experimental investigation of the physical mechanisms governing the spread of wildfires

Frédéric Morandini* and Xavier Silvani

Laboratoire Sciences Pour l’Environnement, U.M.R. C.N.R.S. 6134, Université de Corse, campus Grimaldi, 20250 Corte, France.

* Corresponding author. Telephone: +33 495 450 243; fax: +33 495 453 326; email: frederic.morandini@univ-corse.fr

Abstract

One of the objectives of the present study is to gain a deeper understanding of the heat transfer mechanisms that control the spread of wildfires. Five experimental fires were conducted in the field across on plots of living vegetation. The lengths of the ignition lines were set in the range of 20–30 m to reproduce wildfire front conditions as closely as possible. The experiments were performed under various vegetation properties, wind conditions and plot topography to highlight different fire spread behaviours. This study focused on characterising heat transfer ahead of the flame front. The temperature and heat flux were measured at the top of the vegetation as the fire spread. The results showed the existence of two different fire spread regimes that were either dominated by radiation or governed by mixed radiant-convective heat transfer. For plume-dominated fires, the flow strongly responds to the great buoyancy forces generated by the fire; this guides the fire plume upward. For wind-driven fires, the flow is governed by inertial forces due to the wind, and the fire plume is greatly tilted towards unburned vegetation. The correlations of the temperature (ahead of the flame front) and wind velocity fluctuations change according to the fire regime. The longitudinal distributions of the radiant heat flux ahead of the fire front are also discussed. The data showed that neither the convective Froude number nor the Nelson convection
number—used in the literature to predict fire spread regimes—reflect the observed behaviour of wind-driven fires.

*Keywords:* wildfires; field experiments; temperature; heat transfer; radiation.

**Introduction**

Experimental fires have been widely used in fire research to further our understanding of the complex mechanisms governing the behaviour of fires. A large number of experiments have been carried out at the laboratory scale to study fires propagating across fuel beds (Dupuy 1995, Mendes-Lopes *et al.* 2003, Viegas *et al.* 2004). These reduced-scale experiments allow the observation of the main features encountered in wildfires and even some specific behaviour such as eruptive fire (Viegas 2006). However, fire is a scale-dependent process (Pitts 1991), and studying a fire as it spreads under full-scale conditions appears more relevant than across small fuel beds. Indeed, flame front properties (height, irradiance, etc.) and the resulting heat transfer mechanisms in the laboratory are not of the same order of magnitude as those in the field. In a previous work (Silvani and Morandini 2009), a comparison of radiation levels impinging ahead of flame fronts, with heights in the range of 0.3–6 m, exhibited significant differences. Therefore, real-scale fire experiments that are representative of most of the physical processes involved in wildfires are needed to gain a deeper understanding of how they spread and to establish useful safety distances for fire managers. To this end, measuring devices dedicated to wildfire applications must be developed, since instrumentation in the field has raised logistical problems that need to be overcome.

Luis et al. 2004, Vega et al. 2006). However, these studies only provided observations or measurements of the macroscopic characteristics of the flame front (rate of spread, flame length, flame tilt angle, residence time, etc.). Temperature and heat fluxes were measured less frequently (Packam and Pompe 1971, Gould et al. 1997, Butler 2003, Stocks et al. 2004, Butler et al. 2004, Cohen 2004, Silvani et al. 2005, Santoni et al. 2006, Morandini et al. 2006, Silvani and Morandini 2009). The data available in the related literature are summarised in Table 1.

Such measurements, obtained on a large scale, are also needed to improve and validate physical-based modelling of wildfires (Morvan and Dupuy 2004, Linn and Cunningham 2005, Porterie et al. 2005a, Mell et al. 2007). Caution should be exercised when predicting fire spread with models or sub-models developed from and/or validated against laboratory experiments, since these formulations can be misleading when applied to large-scale fire scenarios. For instance, if thermal degradation of the vegetative fuel is modelled by laws established for low heating rates or low masses of the samples, i.e. conditions which are not representative of the mechanisms involved in wildfire spread, extrapolation to a larger scale is prone to errors. Measurements obtained from large-scale experiments are also expected to provide some guidance or validate predictions of fire safety zones (Butler and Cohen 1998, Dupuy and Morvan 2005, Kaiss et al. 2007) and wildland urban interface dimensioning (Cohen 2004, Consalvi et al. 2005, Porterie et al. 2005b). Some of these modelling approaches (Butler and Cohen 1998, Cohen 2004, Kaiss et al. 2007, Zarate et al. 2008) are based on purely radiative models in which the role of convection is neglected—an approach that may not be correct. Indeed, previously proposed physics-based models of fire spread under wind-blown conditions (Pagni and Peterson 1973, Porterie et al. 2000, Morvan and Dupuy 2004, Mell et al. 2007, Morvan et al. 2009) predicted the existence of a significant convective flux on top of the fuel layer in some configurations.
Fire spread results from the interaction of many processes: heat and mass transfer, thermal degradation of the combustible material and reactions in gaseous and solid phases. Understanding the heat transfer mechanisms governing fire propagation across vegetative fuels is thus of great interest in fire research and forest management. Fire grows and spreads across vegetative fuels by direct burning, which results from impingement of the flame on combustible materials, and from heat transfer towards the unburned fuel by means of radiation and/or convection (combustion products). Environmental factors such as wind, topography and vegetation type can affect the rate and direction of heat transfer and resulting fire spread. These parameters can be controlled in small-scale experiments in the laboratory. However, the slope, fuel and particularly wind are hardly controllable when conducting fire experiments in the field, i.e. under conditions close to those encountered in wildfires. The variability of these conditions in the open explains the drastic changes in fire dynamics which are responsible for many firefighter casualties during interventions. The most significant effects are observed in the flame front properties and dynamics. The volume of reacting gases, amount of heat release and the span of incident radiation can increase by several orders of magnitude during fire spread; even for a given set of ambient conditions, the fire front can propagate within a wide range of spread rates (Viegas 2006). This is the main reason why it is difficult to extrapolate fire spread mechanisms from the laboratory to the field. Data collection in the field is thus the best alternative for understanding the fire spread processes and for validating or improving models. These considerations are the main motivation for developing new measurement devices capable of collecting data in the field during fire spread.
Materials and methods

Fire experiments procedure

Five experimental fires were conducted in the Mediterranean region (south of France) across plots of shrublands. The fires were lit along the windward edge of the plots using a petrol torch. The lengths of the ignition lines were 20–30 m to replicate wildfire conditions. The orientation of the plot was chosen according to the main prevailing wind direction to ensure wind-aided fire spread conditions. A detailed description of the plot characteristics and environmental conditions are provided in Table 2. The experiments were conducted under various vegetation properties, wind conditions and plot topography, but the focus of this study was on characterising the heat transfer ahead of the flame front.

Plots and fuel properties

Plots with vegetative fuel as homogeneous as possible and high vegetation cover (coverage > 95%) were chosen for the fire experiments. The basic properties of the vegetation were measured and are provided in Table 2. The dominant species were Syrmatium glabrum, Arbutus unedo, Genista lobelia, Erica arborea and Asphodelus albus. Before the fire experiments, the total fuel load (dead and live fuel from litter and canopy) and vegetation height were measured from three sample areas of 1 m² in size. Samples were taken close to the experimental plots so that the vegetation cover would not be modified. Fuel moisture content was obtained from three samples of the most abundant species. Samples were oven-dried at 60°C for 24 h, and the fuel moisture was expressed as a percentage of the dried weight (Allgöwer et al. 2006). The amount of fuel removed by the fire, i.e. the fuel consumption, was expressed as the ratio of the amount of char remaining after the fire, over the three 1 m² sample areas, to the fuel load.
Measurement devices

The heat flux and gas temperature during the fire spread experiments were measured by an intrusive sensor system capable of resisting the fire (Silvani and Morandini 2009). The device consists of two heat flux gauges and a thermocouple fixed to a steel support facing the approaching fire front. It is designed to be fast and easy to set up (less than 30 min) with the possibility to be deployed in forest fires. The inside of the device was coated with a 4-cm thick layer of insulating material (ceramic felt); the inside temperature never exceeded 70°C during the experiments. In every case, the measurements were made close to the top of the vegetation using different supporting rods. A photograph of this device is shown in Fig. 1.

The gas temperature was measured using a K-type thermocouple with a 250-μm-diameter grounded junction. This configuration was chosen to guarantee a good compromise between accuracy and resistance; fine wire thermocouples are less affected by radiation effects and have a faster response (Cox and Chitty 1985), which allows the rapid fluctuations of the gas temperature to be recorded with good accuracy. The response time of the thermocouples used in this study was less than 0.2 s. Each thermocouple was covered with a ceramic insulator and inserted in a 10-cm-long stainless steel tube, leaving the junction to protrude from the device. These devices provided information on the flame residence time and peak temperature.

The total and radiant heat fluxes emitted from the flame front during the fire spread were measured with Medtherm transducers (16H and 64 Series). A sapphire window attachment was added to the radiant heat flux transducer to eliminate the convective heat being transferred to the sensing area. These transducers were calibrated by the manufacturer to 0–200 kW m⁻² and had a response time of less than 0.25 s, which provided accurate measurements for an approaching fire front. The transducers were oriented towards the flame front and had a view angle of 150°. A thermocouple recorded the body temperature of the gauge.
Thermocouples and heat flux gauges were plugged into a power-supplied data logger buried 0.3 m under the ground surface to protect it from the fire. Extension cables insulated by a Teflon coating, a layer of ceramic and an outer layer of aluminium connected the sensors to the underground data logger by passing through the steel tube of the support carrying the sensors. This configuration was chosen to allow the use of short extension cables (1.5 m) to reduce the measurement errors. The transducers signals were recorded at a sampling rate of 1 Hz. This sampling frequency matched the response time of the sensors used.

The wind, which can be highly variable in the open, is one of the most significant variables influencing fire spread (Cheney et al. 1993). The wind velocity and direction were recorded using a two-dimensional ultrasonic anemometer 2.5 m above the ground surface to reflect the average wind acting on the fire front. The anemometer was located on the downwind edge of the vegetation plot to minimise the influence of the fire on the wind measurements. Furthermore, such a location protected the ultrasonic transducers from smoke and large-diameter firebrands generated by the fire which can affect sonic measurements. The wind data were recorded using another (synchronised) data logger at a sampling rate of 1 Hz.

Finally, to obtain accurate observations of the fire spread, three digital video cameras were used to record the rear, front and side views of the fire. The video recordings (25 images per second) provided information on the rate of fire spread and the geometric properties of the flame, i.e. the flame height and tilt angle. A virtual grid was drawn on the video images by means of reference marks placed regularly every 5 m. The known positions of these marks helped to relate the position and dimensions of the flame on the virtual grid to its real position and dimensions on the field. The rate of spread was obtained from the slope of the curve representing the fire front position versus time. About eight data points were obtained for each curve by timing the arrival of the fire front head to the reference marks. A least squares regression was used to fit a straight line to these points. The flame front depth was computed
from the product of the residence time and the rate of spread. The flame length and height
were defined along the mean flame axis and the vertical, respectively. The flame tilt angle
was defined as the angle between the terrain and the leading surface of the flame.

Results and discussion

Fire front properties and behaviour

Every experimental plot was ignited as a line fire along the windward plot edge; the fire fronts
developed a curvilinear shape during their spread. Details of the environmental conditions and
related fire properties are reported in Table 2. The average wind properties remained nearly
constant during the experiments, and the fires reached a quasi-steady state. The steady
correlation factors ($R^2$) for the least squares regression, which was computed to obtain the rate
of spread, were in the range of 0.86–0.96. These high $R^2$ values are a good indicator of fire steadiness. The vegetative fuels were mostly composed of fine materials (needles, leaves and
twigs) with diameters that were lower than 2 cm; consequently, the fuel consumption was
very high for the set of experiments. The fireline intensity, which represents the heat released
per unit time per unit length of the fire front, is defined as the product of the weight of fuel
consumed (kg m$^{-2}$), the heat yield of the fuel (assumed to be 18 000 kJ kg$^{-1}$ for most
vegetative fuel) and the rate of spread (m s$^{-1}$). The measured fire intensities were in the range
of 8 300–31 000 kW m$^{-1}$. These values are consistent with the intensities measured during the
experiments across similar fuel loads (Table 1). The high intensities measured during
experiments 1–3 (16 000–31 000 kW m$^{-1}$) can be attributed to the significant fuel load (4.1–
7.4 kg m$^{-2}$) of particular vegetal species ($Syrmatium$ $glaibrum$ and $Genista$ $lobelia$). Fire tests
conducted across these broom species, which are very inflammable, generate high intensities
with fire fronts travelling very fast even under low-risk conditions (wind velocity < 5 m s$^{-1}$,
high fuel moisture content). It should be noted that post-fire measurements were performed at least 1 h after the passage of the fire front, when the temperature had decreased to a sufficient extent to allow the safe sampling of the remaining char. During this time period, mass loss continued due to char oxidation from large-diameter materials (>2 cm) which did not participate in the spreading of the pyrolysis front; thus, the amount of fuel actually consumed within the flaming front was overestimated. Furthermore, the rate of spread was determined at the fire head or at the most advanced point of the fire front; this was because the initial straight line of ignition was observed to change to a parabolic shape when quasi-steady propagation was achieved. Both sources of errors contributed to overestimation of the fireline intensity.

Qualitative observations of the fire spread from video recordings revealed the existence of two types of fires according to the flame front properties and behaviour. Photographs of the fire spread in experiments 2 and 4 are shown in Fig. 2. In the first type of fire (experiments 1, 2 and 3), the flames stood up (flame heights were about 5 m) and the smoke plume was guided upwards to produce a nearly vertical convection column. The flow strongly responded to the heating and buoyancy forces generated by the fire (Fig. 2a), and no smoke was observed to flow ahead of the fire front. In the second type (experiments 4 and 5), the inertial forces exceeded the buoyancy forces, and the flow did not respond to heating generated by the fire. In this case, the buoyancy forces generated by the fire were weaker because of the lower fuel load. The flame front was greatly tilted forward (Fig. 2b), and the flame height was about 1.5 m. The top of the unburned vegetation layer was subjected to intermittent lapping by the flames, and the fire travelled quickly across the vegetation. The smoke flowed close to the top of the vegetation, embedding the unburned vegetation within a layer of hot gases released by combustion. In the following sections, the effects of the fire behaviour on the temperature and heat flux measurements are examined.
**Gas temperature**

Thermocouples are commonly used in fire research to measure gas temperatures, but they often fail to measure the true gas temperature (Cox and Chitty 1985, Luo 1997, Dupuy et al. 2003, Silvani and Morandini 2009). Radiation effects that depend on the measurement conditions are the most significant sources of errors. Discrepancies between the true and measured gas temperatures are considered acceptable since the error range of the probes used in this study is less than 10% (Silvani and Morandini 2009). The corrected temperature curves are not provided here, but the effects of radiation on the thermocouple measurements must be kept in mind.

The flame residence time for each experiment is listed in Table 2 and is defined as the time during which the temperature is greater than 500°C, which corresponds to the visible flame temperature (Drysdale 1985). The flame residence times did not show significant differences and thus could not account for the two fire spread behaviours identified previously.

The temperature-time curves for the five experiments are shown in Fig. 3. The air temperature measured during the fire spread showed the presence of three regions: preheating, flaming and charring. These regions are delineated by two vertical dashed lines in Fig. 3, using the previously defined flame temperature criteria. The measured temperatures began at the ambient temperature and increased to a maximum of about 800–900°C, which is the usual temperature range for burning vegetal fuels. The temperature curves show a slow trend modulated by fast fluctuations. The slow trend, or the low-frequency part of the signal, is related to the fire spreading, while the fluctuations are due to flame pulsations and wind gusts (Morandini et al. 2006).

In the first group of experiments, the air temperature remained close to the ambient value before the arrival of the fire front. The rate of the rise in air temperature from ambient to
ignition was computed from low-pass filtered signals (Silvani et al. 2005) and is provided in Table 2. The corresponding flame fronts (Fig. 2a) were close to the vertical, and the smoke plume was guided upward. Some peculiarities in the temperature behaviour were observed in experiment 2. The temperature suddenly dropped to 200°C for about 20 s due to the presence of discontinuities in the fuel; these resulted from animal paths that passed through the experimental plot. These discontinuities induced local extinction of the fire. The measurements made in the preheating region, which are of greater interest, were not influenced by this vegetation discontinuity. The rising temperature rate during preheating in the second group of experiments was about one-fifth lower than that in the first group. Furthermore, the increase in air temperature occurred over a longer period before flame contact (more than 100 s prior to the ignition of vegetation), and the temperature measurements showed high fluctuations. These fluctuations were higher in the second group than in the first because of the presence of the smoke plume as well as the intermittent lapping at the top of the vegetation by the flame (Fig. 2b).

Computing the correlation coefficient and related confidence intervals helps to determine if a statistical relation exists between temperature and wind velocity fluctuations. The correlation coefficient between temperature and velocity is given by:

$$r = \frac{\text{cov}(T,u)}{\sigma_T \sigma_u}$$

(1)

where \(\text{cov}\) is the covariance of temperature \(T\) and longitudinal wind velocity \(u\), and \(\sigma\) is the standard deviation. The square of \(r\), namely, the coefficient of determination \(r^2\), is used to measure the association between both variables. The coefficient of determination is the fraction of the variance in \(u\) that is accounted for by changes in \(T\) and the linear relationship between \(u\) and \(T\). A confidence level of 95% and sample size of 100 s were chosen. As expected, the correlation between temperature and wind velocity was better in the second
group of experiments ($r^2 = 0.2$) than in the first group ($r^2 = 0.015$). In addition, a confidence level of 80% and sample size of 200 s were also tested. In the first group of experiments, the confidence interval width remained at around 0.01. In contrast, the confidence interval width increased to around 0.2 when either the confidence level increased or the sample size decreased. The $r^2$ statistical convergence can thus be enhanced by increasing the sampling rate. The $r^2$ value showed a considerable decrease when $r$ decreased by one-tenths of its original value. Indeed, the $r^2$ values in the range of 0.2–0.3 coincided with $r$ values in the range of 0.5–0.6. In contrast, $r$ was about 0.1 when $r^2$ was lower than 0.05. Although the correlation between $T$ and $u$ is not linear, a statistical relation cannot be ignored in the second group of experiments, while it can be neglected for the first group. In other words, wind did not significantly influence heat transfer ahead of the flame front in the first group of experiments. Conversely, in the second group of experiments, coupling between wind and temperature was observed in the preheating region. Indeed, the correlation coefficient between temperature and velocity as well as the fluctuating nature of the temperature signal suggest the presence of convective heat transfer in the preheating region. In this case, the unburned vegetation was embedded into a wind-driven smoke layer (Fig. 2). However, to obtain a correct representation of the heat transfer processes governing fire spread, it was necessary to simultaneously use several sensors scattered through the vegetation plot during the experiments. The mechanisms governing heat transfer towards unburned vegetation may be different at the fire head or flanks. Numerical simulations in the presence of an ambient wind (Mell et al. 2007) showed that the flanks of the fire perimeter spread under conditions alternating between heading and baking fires, which influences the heat transfer processes. In general, because the information collected by a thermocouple is local in nature, it is not adequate to investigate the heat transport phenomena using single-point measurements, and
measurements of temperature distributions or integral quantities such as heat fluxes should be preferred.

**Heat fluxes**

The time evolution of the total and radiant heat fluxes measured during the fire spread experiments are shown in Fig. 4. The preheating, flaming and charring regions can also be observed in these curves. The heat fluxes progressively increased up to maximum values exceeding 100 kW m\(^{-2}\) when the flame was in contact with the measurement device. However, caution should be exercised in interpreting the heat flux measurements in a mixed radiant-convective environment, especially those obtained from total heat flux gauges. The calibration process consists of determining the sensitivity (kW m\(^{-2}\) mV\(^{-1}\)) of the transducers in comparison to the output voltage of a known calibration source. The calibration should ideally be performed in a thermal environment similar to the one in which the gauges will be used; however, gauge calibration is usually performed using radiant sources such as a black body, furnace or radiant panel. It may not be entirely appropriate to measure the total heat flux using a Gardon gauge through radiation-based calibration in a mixed radiative-convective environment such as a fire (Bryant *et al.* 2003). The gauge sensitivity differs for radiative and convective contributions; a method to estimate measurement uncertainties from total gauges in a mixed radiative-convective environment has been proposed (Kuo and Kulkarni 1991). This method allows the total incident flux to be calculated when calibration is based only on radiative flux. Bryant *et al.* (2003) highlighted the uncertainties caused by convection when radiation is the quantity under consideration and proposed a method to calculate the incident radiant heat flux from total gauges. In both cases, the applied corrections are obtained from the thermal diffusion equation for a foil and are expressed according to the convective heat transfer coefficient or the Nusselt number, which depends on the thermophysical properties of
the fluid (density, specific heat at constant pressure, viscosity and thermal conductivity) in contact with the gauge, the velocity of the fluid, the flow regime (turbulent or laminar), the nature of convection (natural or forced convection) and the geometry of the surface of the heated gauge. The uncertainties in determining the parameters of the correction method, i.e. the convective heat transfer coefficient or the Nusselt number, make these corrections difficult to apply. A previous work (Silvani and Morandini 2009), quantified the error when following the method proposed by Kuo and Kulkarni (1991); it was determined that the total heat flux is underestimated in the flaming region.

The radiation heat flux transducers are not subject to such uncertainties since the window attachment eliminates convection. Nevertheless, these gauges may suffer from deposition of soot on the sapphire window attachment. The use of gas purging eliminates soot deposition, but this is not easy to implement in the field. To clarify the deposition of soot on the radiometer window, a preliminary study was conducted in the laboratory using fires from a forest fuel burner (Appendix 1). The results showed that the deposition of soot on the gauge window can be considered negligible when the radiometer is only exposed to smoke, but flame contact with the gauge leads to the deposition of a significant quantity of soot on the window. For this reason, the radiation heat flux gauges underestimate radiation inside sooty flames; thus, only the measurements ahead of the fire front are considered in the following sections.

Using two different gauge types allows the qualitative partitioning of the convective and radiative processes in the preheating region. When the total and radiation heat fluxes coincide, heat transfer ahead of the fire front is dominated by radiation, and gauges provide accurate quantitative measurements. Conversely, greater discrepancies between the two signals indicate preheating due to mixed radiant-convective heat transfer. By integrating the heat flux curves ahead of the flame front, the differences between radiation and total heat fluxes can be
evaluated in the preheating region. In the first group of experiments, these differences were lower than 10%, so radiation could be considered as the dominant heat transfer process ahead of the fire front. In the second group of experiments, the measurements revealed the non-negligible contribution of convective preheating for the unburned fuel, but the heat flux levels were lower. The difference between the radiation and total heat fluxes was as great as 50% (experiment 4). These results confirm the existence of a convective component ahead of the flame front. The significant role of convective heat transport in the overall thermal balance ahead of the flame front is related to the stronger correlation between fluctuating temperature and wind velocity fields. This study did not focus on the quantitative measurement of the convective exchange between the hot gas stream and vegetation. Aside from the previously mentioned problems of radiation-based calibration for total heat flux gauges in a mixed environment, the convective heat transfer coefficient of the transducer was different from that of the fuel particles. The geometric properties (shape and orientation) and thermal conductivity of the fuel particles should be taken into account to estimate convective heating from the viewpoint of the vegetation. Furthermore, the vertical velocity profile within the vegetation has significant effects on advection, and convective heating varies within the fuel layer. For instance, quantitative measurements of the convection above the vegetation can be performed by determining the temperature and velocity fields using thermocouples and particle image velocimetry, respectively.

Heat transfer mechanisms governing fire spread

The different heat transfer processes ahead of the fire front that are observed between the two groups of experiments are influenced by changes in the fire plume properties and affect the time needed for the unburned vegetation to ignite. The time during which the unburned vegetation is exposed to a radiation heat flux greater than 13 kW m$^{-2}$ is provided in Table 2.
for the set of experiments. This threshold value corresponds to the minimum radiation heat flux needed to ignite volatile matter from the vegetative fuels by a pilot flame (Drysdale, 1985). The exposure time to radiation was significantly longer in the first group of experiments than in the second group. These results show that in the first group of experiments, the preheating mechanisms ahead of the fire front were governed by radiation.

The longitudinal variation in the radiation heat flux impinging upon the unburned vegetation is shown in Fig. 5. The data were deduced from flux-time measurements considering a steady rate of fire spread. The flux-time signals were first filtered before time-to-space transformation with a Butterworth filter to eliminate high signal frequencies (Silvani et al. 2005). This process allowed a better representation of the mean spatial distribution for radiation impinging ahead of the fire front. The distance to the fire front was estimated by multiplying the time to ignition by the rate of spread for each experiment. The spatial distribution of the heat fluxes ahead of the flame front confirmed the existence of two fire spread processes. In the first group of experiments, radiation ahead of the flame front presented some characteristic length scales or impact distances (lengths across which radiation level was greater than the threshold of 13 kW m$^{-2}$) of about three times the flame height. Thermal radiation is a long-range process and is usually considered as the dominant mode of heat transfer, which determines the growth and spread of large-scale fires (Sacadura 2005). Incident radiation plays a significant role in the thermal degradation of the fuel through processes such as water evaporation and fuel pyrolysis. Heat flux measurements were performed above the vegetation; therefore, they are related to the energy impinging on the top of the fuel layer, i.e. the incident radiation. The typical absorptivity of vegetation in the Mediterranean region, which depends on fuel properties (spectral, shape, orientation and moisture content), is around 0.9 with reference to the radiation emitted by a black body at 1000°C (Monod et al. 2009). The top of the vegetation absorbed most of the thermal radiation
measured by the transducers. The radiation mean path length within the vegetation was smaller, as was the radiation penetrating inside the fuel layer.

For experiments 1–3, the measurements showed significant radiation levels up to 10 m from the fire front (Fig. 5). The thermal degradation of the vegetative fuel due to radiant heating began several meters ahead of the flame front. It is argued that the fire spreading scenario, which involves ignition of the mixture formed by these combustible gases and by the oxidiser located ahead of the flame front, is most commonly observed in wildland fires.

Most safety criteria (fuel breaks or wildland-urban interfaces) are based on a radiation-dominated fire spread (Butler and Cohen 1998, Cohen 2004, Zarate et al. 2008). However, the present heat flux measurements indicate the existence of a different scenario. In the second group of experiments, the radiation level ahead of the flame front was lower than 13 kW m\(^{-2}\) (Fig. 5); this value is too low for sustained pyrolysis of the vegetative fuel to occur. In this case, the fire spread by convection heating, which is related to the intermittent licking of the top of the unburned vegetation by the flame. Physics-based models developed in previous studies (Morvan and Dupuy 2004, Linn and Cunningham 2005, Morvan et al. 2009) predicted a change in the fire spread regime dominated by either radiation or convection under low or high wind conditions, respectively. This change in the fire spread regime is usually predicted using the convective Froude number \(F_c\) (Clark et al. 1996) or the convection number \(N_c\) (Nelson 1993). These dimensionless numbers represent the ratio of the inertial forces induced by wind flow and the buoyancy forces generated by combustion. The convective Froude number and convection number are given by:

\[
F_c = \frac{(u-r)^2}{g \Delta \frac{\theta}{\theta_s}}
\]

\[
N_c = \frac{2 g I}{\rho C_p \theta_s (u-r)^3}
\]
where $u$ stands for the average wind velocity (m s$^{-1}$), $r$ is the rate of fire spread (m s$^{-1}$), $g$ is the acceleration due to gravity (m s$^{-2}$), $\Delta \theta$ is the difference between the temperatures of the hot gases and the surroundings, $\theta_a$ is the temperature of the surroundings (K), $I$ is the fireline intensity (kW m$^{-1}$), $\rho$ is the air density (1.2 kg m$^{-3}$) and $C_p$ is the specific heat of dry air at constant pressure (1.005 kJ kg$^{-1}$ K$^{-1}$). The variable $\ell$ (m) is a characteristic length scale of the flame front which is representative of buoyancy forces generated by the fire, i.e. the flame’s length, $L$, depth, $D$ or height, $H$.

In numerical simulations (Pagni and Peterson 1973, Clark et al. 1996, Morvan and Dupuy 2004, Morvan 2006), researchers suggested that $F_r^{1/2} < 1$ (resp. $N_c > 1$) indicates a plume-dominated fire, while $F_r^{1/2} > 1$ (resp. $N_c < 1$) indicates a wind-driven fire. In this study, the convective Froude and convection numbers (Table 2) were lower than 0.4 and greater than 14, respectively. These results therefore confirm the conclusions of Sullivan’s analysis of grassland fires (Sullivan 2007). Neither dimensionless number reflects the observed behaviour of wind-driven fires at the field scale and both numbers seem more appropriate for quantifying academic fire spread scenarios such as laboratory-scale experiments or numerical simulations. The wind-driven fire spread regime, in which the contribution of convection becomes significant due to contact of the fire plume with unburned vegetation, should be taken into account when managing safety zones. Simulation results (Porterie et al. 2005b, Morvan 2006) also pointed out that convection cannot be neglected in predicting fire safety zones when plume impingement occurs. Morvan and Dupuy (2004) clarified that for wind-driven fires, radiation and convective heat transfer initially have the same order of magnitude; however, fire propagation is subsequently controlled by convective heat transfer, which can represent up to 70% of the energy received by the solid fuel. The existence of such a regime, which is favoured by a low fuel load (generating less buoyancy forces) on steep slopes and under wind-aided conditions, suggests that the dimensioning of fuel breaks in vegetal cover
may not be appropriate if it is based only on a purely radiative evaluation of the impact
distance.

Conclusion
The heat transfer mechanisms ahead of a flame front were investigated in the field to further
our understanding of how wildfires spread. Within the range of experimental configurations
considered (wind velocities < 5 m s⁻¹), the collected data indicated the existence of two fire
spread regimes. The first regime, which occurs for higher fuel loads, is plume-dominated. In
this case, the flow strongly responds to the great buoyancy forces generated by the fire:
flames and smoke plume are guided upward. Radiation is the dominant heat transfer
mechanism ahead of the fire front. The second regime, which occurs for lower fuel loads, is
wind-driven. In this case, the flow is governed by inertial forces due to wind: flames and
smokes travel close to the top of the vegetation. Preheating of the unburned fuel occurs due to
mixed radiant-convective heat transfer. The flame front spreads quickly by direct contact with
unburned fuel. Within the range of experimental conditions considered in this study, it was
found that the Clark’s convective Froude number and Nelson’s convection number, which are
used in numerical studies to predict the fire spread regime, did not reflect the observed
behaviour of the wind-driven fires in the field. The complexity of the turbulent wind flow
modified by the fire needs further investigation to assess the role of convective heat transfer
in greater detail. Convection can endanger fuel break efficiency or firefighter safety if these
distances are determined according to radiation only.

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Appendix 1

A preliminary study of the deposition of soot on the radiometer window was conducted in the laboratory using two radiation heat flux transducers with sapphire windows and fires from a forest fuel burner. The burner was made from a 50-cm-diameter basket filled with 500 g of forest fuel (Pinus pinaster needles) and ignited using alcohol. Prior to each fire test, both radiometers were exposed to a radiant source of about 60 kW/m² in order to check the good agreement (Table A). In the first test, one radiometer was exposed to a smoke plume about 50 cm above the flame for 200 s. After exposure, the measurements of the heat flux gauge exposed to smoke were compared to those of the soot-free reference radiometer. In the second test, the radiometer was exposed to the flame for 60 s, and the measurements obtained were compared with those of the reference radiometer. The attenuation of the gauge reading after smoke exposure was not significant. These results confirm that the deposition of soot on the gauge window can be considered as negligible when the transducer is only exposed to smoke.
(in the preheating region, for instance). This is due to the well-ventilated nature of the flame in the open in contrast with fire in an enclosure. In contrast, flame contact with the gauge deposited a significant quantity of soot on the window. In this case, the attenuation measured during this test was about 25%; therefore, radiation measurement in the flaming region could no longer be considered. When the radiometer is used in a hostile flame environment, nitrogen purging is used to prevent soot deposition in order to keep the radiation transmitting window clean. The purge system requires the use of an inert gas which flows ahead of the window to prevent soot from depositing on it. Another alternative is the use of ellipsoidal radiometers with gas purging to prevent soot from entering its cavity.