Natural disasters, fires, floods and droughts: environmental aspects

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Edite ESTRELA (PES, PT) on the environmental aspects of natural disasters (fires, droughts and floods). The report highlighted the role of climate change in exacerbating natural disasters but pointed out that preventive measures, better planning and the preservation of ecosystems could reduce the impact of such disasters. It recommended establishing a European observatory on drought, desertification, floods and other effects of climate change in order to gather information and ensure a more effective response.

MEPs wanted to see more sustainable, rational and efficient use of water in the EU, with suitable measures being targeted at major water consumers in agriculture, tourism, towns and industry. They also highlighted the need to promote awareness-raising campaigns on how to prevent natural disasters, including fires and floods, to be funded by the European Social Fund or by specific programmes such as Forest Focus. Member States were urged to step up cooperation at EU level to ensure that additional resources were made available rapidly in order to respond to emergency situations. The Commission was asked to co-finance the building of infrastructure and the acquisition of technical equipment for fighting forest fires. New forms of fire prevention and detection should be developed using satellites and other cutting-edge technologies.

The report stressed the need to reflect on the role of forests in the EU "as part of a systematic set of land management measures". It wanted to see better use of the Structural and Cohesion Funds for structural measures to combat drought, "the main aggravating factor in natural disasters", as well as incentives for forest conservation and management of the countryside so as to establish a variety of uses. It added that monoculture should be practised "only in clearly circumscribed areas". Other recommendations included increasing funding for the Forest Focus programme, providing sufficient funding for conservation of the Natura 2000 network and using Community funds to restore the areas of the network affected by fires or floods.

Lastly, MEPs called for tougher penalties for "criminal acts against the environment", especially causing forest fires.