Natural disasters, fires, floods and droughts: agricultural aspects

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Luis Manuel CAPOULAS SANTOS (PES, PT) on the agricultural aspects of natural disasters (forest fires, drought and floods). The report focused in particular on the increasing problem of forest fires and said that this had been worsening as a result of the progressive abandonment of the countryside and of farming and its traditional activities. The abandonment of agricultural land, the low direct profitability of forested land and the high cost of its maintenance did not encourage good forest management by owners, leading to an accumulation of undergrowth, wood and other combustible material. The committee pointed out that, "in areas where the woodland is socio-economically profitable, there are considerably fewer fires", and said that priority should be given under rural development plans to measures aimed at combating the structural problems of the rural environment (population loss, abandonment of farmland, intensive building, deforestation and the excessive fragmentation of woodland ownership) as well as measures aimed at the causes of the disasters (combating erosion, repopulating woodland with appropriate species, preservation of firebreaks, etc.).

MEPs also said that it was essential that the financial framework for 2007-2013 should include a Community programme for protection against forest fires, with a view to promoting awareness campaigns and risk prevention and management measures in respect of forest fires, suitably funded and complementing agricultural and structural policy. They added that such a programme should take account of the specific characteristics of the Mediterranean forests. The committee also reiterated Parliament's call for a European drought monitoring centre which could involve permanent arrangements for the exchange of information which would support the prevention of fires throughout the EU. The report further noted thatthe drawing up of risk maps and management plans should not be restricted to flooding, as in the Commission's proposed directive, but should cover drought and forest fires as well. And it called for a proposal for a directive on fighting and preventing fires, "to enable optimisation of the use of the various Community instruments in existence, including the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), in order to tackle the problem, and to improve coordination among regions and Member States".

Amongst its other recommendations, the committee wanted the Solidarity Fund to cover drought and frost, and to cover intervention in the case of disasters which are under the damage threshold laid down even though they entail severe and lasting repercussions for the living conditions of the inhabitants of a given region. The Commission was urged to put forward a legislative proposal introducing a flexibility clause which would enable the policy instruments existing to deal with natural disasters in the agricultural sector to be properly financed, "from CAP headings which now go unused each year".