Natural disasters, fires, floods and droughts: regional development aspects

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by its chair, Gerardo GALEOTE QUECEDO (EPP-ED, ES), on the regional development aspects of natural disasters (fires, drought and floods). The report pointed out that, in 2005, there was serious flooding in Europe, fires destroyed thousands of hectares of forest and there was a drought of exceptional intensity and duration, especially in the south and west of Europe. It added that natural disasters have a catastrophic effect - in both the short and the long term - on the economy of the regions, with adverse repercussions for infrastructure, economic potential, employment, the natural and cultural heritage, the environment and tourism. Fire and drought in particular had become "an annual scourge" for the regions and countries affected, and the problem was getting worse.

In response, MEPs said that that Commission should draw up a European strategy to combat natural disasters, including a compulsory approach for risk prevention, and devise a technical protocol for joint action by the Union. A survey should be drawn up in all the Member States of the locations which are most vulnerable to fires and to prolonged droughts - and also of the resources available at those locations. The committee called for the creation of a "European Civil Protection Force" and wanted the Commission to propose a directive on fire prevention and management in the EU in order to make the best possible use of existing Community and national resources. A similar proposal should be drafted on drought-risk prevention and management, and the Commission was also urged to look into the establishment of a European monitoring centre for drought and desertification.

In other recommendations, the committee called for the 2007-2013 financial framework to include a Community forest-fire protection programme designed to promote "adequately funded forest-fire awareness-raising, prevention and risk-management initiatives dovetailing with agricultural- and structural-policy measures". The Commission's forthcoming Forestry Action Plan should contain provision for a possible European Fire Fund or European Forest Fund to support action aimed at conserving and restoring the mountain and forest areas included in the Natura 2000 network. MEPs also called on the Commission to make available the resources needed to relieve suffering and satisfy the material needs of all the victims of natural disasters and their direct families, by means of the European Solidarity Fund and other Community instruments. Lastly, they wanted consideration to be given to setting up an agriculture disaster fund to compensate any loss of income stemming from crop losses of farmers affected by natural disasters.