Natural disasters, fires, floods and droughts: agricultural aspects

2005/2195(INI) - 18/05/2006 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Luis Manuel **CAPOULAS SANTOS** (PES, PT) on the agricultural aspects of natural disasters (forest fires, drought and floods). The resolution was adopted by 397 votes in favour 70 against and 26 abstentions. (This resolution is closely linked to two other resolutions adopted at the same time, on the environmental and agricultural aspects respectively, of natural disasters. Please see INI/2005/2192 and INI/2005/2193.)

Parliament felt that the Solidarity Fund should continue to cover intervention in the case of disasters which are, though significant, under the damage threshold laid down but embody severe and lasting repercussions on the living conditions of the inhabitants of a given region, with the possibility of extraordinary assistance existing in such cases. The Commission must submit a legislative proposal introducing a flexibility clause which would enable the policy existing instruments, notably the EUSF, to deal with natural disasters in the agricultural sector to be properly financed, by using CAP headings which are currently unused every year.

Parliament believed that rural development policy could play a useful role in the prevention of natural disasters. It stressed that the drastic reduction in resources for rural development hindered the drafting of action plans to prevent damage caused by natural disasters. It recommended, however, that national and regional rural development plans give priority to measures aimed at the causes of the disasters (inter alia, the fight against erosion, the repopulation of woodland with appropriate species, the preservation of firebreaks, hydraulic projects, the maintenance of woodland, and water-saving agro-environmental action).

Moving on, Parliament urged the Commission to provide support for measures aimed at reducing the combustibility of forests, such as encouraging the profitability of forests and their sustainable management, and using residual forest biomass as renewable energy. The Member States and the Commission were also asked to implement a programme for the exchange of experiences on the application of new technologies for the management and monitoring of forest fires, and to draw up procedures for European-level validation of the qualifications of technical staff. It was essential, furthermore, that within the framework of the rural development plans, priority should be given to actions tending to combat the structural rural problems (inter alia, depopulation, the abandoning of farmland, the protection of the countryside from intensive building, deforestation, and the excessive fragmentation of woodland ownership) which, if they are not held in check, will increase future levels of potential risk. It was also essential, in the context of the Financial Framework for 2007-2013, to establish a Community programme for protection against forest fires, with a view to promoting awareness campaigns, risk-prevention, and risk-management measures regarding forest fires, suitably funded and complementing agricultural and structural policy. This programme must lead to the identification of financing allocated to measures aimed at preventing forest fires. Such a programme must take account of the specific characteristics of the Mediterranean forests.

Parliament was committed to:

- setting up a public insurance scheme, jointly financed by farmers, the Member States and the EU, with a view to creating a better policy framework for risk management and crisis prevention; and

- setting up a consistent and affordable reinsurance scheme for all Member States under the CAP.

This potential new risk-management instrument would need to include a specific insurance for forests, to cover at least the costs of reforestation and ecological rehabilitation after fires. The Commission's proposal would make it difficult to obtain the strong public support required in order for this instrument to be effective.

Parliament also affirmed that serious market crises constitute unforeseen and exceptional events which expose farms to risks that may be as great as those caused by natural disasters and that compensation for these should also be envisaged.

A genuine strategy to deal with the effects of disasters in agriculture could be restricted to emergency measures, and training, information**,** prevention and awareness-raising activities needed to be put in place, funded within the framework of the civil protection mechanism, the Forest Focus programme, rural development policy and the European Regional Fund. Parliament insisted on the need to step up active prevention measures for forest fires, the optimisation and coordination of fire-fighting methods and systems, the encouragement of the participation of society, as well as better research into the causes of fires and stronger action against crime. The following were important:

- a fire-fighting network to facilitate the financing of action plans and the acquisition of resources, with appropriate coordination, at a European level and at an international level;

- rules on sound forest management and mandatory reforestation in the event of natural disasters;

- concrete measures for the implementation of programmes for the active prevention and the environmental education of the rural population, with a view to explaining new ways of forestry management and improving awareness of the future role of forests in particular localities and the benefits arising from their conservation;

- awareness campaigns, at a European level, to be targeted at rural populations, the forest owners and the urban population, and particularly at schoolchildren and young people, voluntary organisations and the media, with a view to promoting a change of attitude towards the use of fire;

- drawing up risk maps and management plans should not be restricted to areas at risk of flooding, as set out in the Commission proposal, but must also cover drought and fires, which involved drawing up maps of areas at high risk of drought and fires within the EU, together with corresponding management plans;

- the creation of a European drought observatory which would be responsible for studying, monitoring and reducing the effects of drought, and which might include permanent arrangements for the information exchange supporting the prevention of fires throughout the Union;

- specific risk-prevention measures targeted at monitoring and managing combustible forest material as well as managing woodland;

- the Commission should submit a proposal for a directive on fighting and preventing fires, which would optimise of the use of the various existing Community instruments, including the EAFRD, in order to tackle the problem, and to improve coordination among regions and Member States.