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

2005/2193(INI) - 18/05/2006 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Gerardo **GALEOTE QUECEDO** (EPP-ED, ES), on the regional development aspects of natural disasters (fires, drought and floods). The report was adopted by 498 votes in favour 35 against 20 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/2005/2195.)

Parliament pointed out that natural disasters in the EU had caused the deaths of 65 000 people since 1980 and cost EUR 124.2 billion, according to UN figures. 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. Natural disasters had catastrophic short and long-term effects on the economy of the regions, especially in less prosperous areas concerned by the convergence objective or ones affected by natural constraints, with damaging repercussions for infrastructure, economic potential, employment, the natural and cultural heritage, the environment and tourism, all of which had an adverse effect on social and economic cohesion. There were still shortcomings in the Community's involvement, which were aggravated by the differing levels of development found in the arrangements made by the individual Member States for combating natural disasters. Community fire-prevention measures are limited almost exclusively to rural development policy and had clearly proved to be inadequate, which demonstrated the need for a specific, adequately funded Community forest protection programme designed to prevent and manage the risk of forest fires and tailored to the specific nature of forests in the Member States.

Parliament felt that the Commission should submit a proposal for a European strategy to combat natural disasters, including comprehensive risk prevention, and devise a technical protocol setting out joint action at Union level addressing suited to each type of disaster and each forest eco-system. The Commission should also adapt Community prevention, research, risk-management, civil-defence and solidarity tools with a view to improving the response to such disasters.

In all the Member States an exhaustive list should be drawn up of the locations which are most vulnerable to fires and to prolonged droughts and also of the resources available, with a view to devising a preventive strategy and enabling genuinely effective action and coordination to be carried out at local level. This proposal should also include measures designed to ensure that water is used rationally by major water consumers, such as farmers, urban users and industry. Particular attention must be paid to isolated regions, regions with low population density or suffering from depopulation, mountainous areas and border regions, outlying and extremely remote regions and the least favoured regions concerned by the convergence objective.

Parliament went on to stress the need to adjust the action of the Structural Funds in the prevention and management of natural disasters as well as to coordinate them with the other existing Community instruments, in order to tackle these disasters. In the forthcoming financial programming for 2007-2013, the necessary flexibility should be ensured in the redistribution of resources available among the different funds, in order to improve their operability in the event of disasters. The Commission was urged to make available the resources needed for the purpose of relieving the suffering and satisfying the material needs of all victims of natural disasters and their immediate families, by means of the EUSF and other

Community instruments. Within the 2007-2013 financial framework a Community forest-fire protection programme must be designed to promote adequately funded forest-fire awareness-raising, prevention and risk-management initiatives dovetailing with agricultural- and structural-policy measures.

The existence of an extensive network of small and medium-sized farms and of an agricultural policy which promotes more sustainable production methods (particularly in the use of water and soil) could help reduce the effects of drought and forest fire.

In addition, the Commission should submit a proposal for a directive for fire prevention and management in the EU. A similar proposal should be drafted on drought-risk prevention and management. Parliament reiterated its call for a European monitoring centre for drought and desertification integrated into the activities of the seventh framework programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007-2013). It deplored the fact that the Commission communication reporting on the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy did not devote special attention to the issue of fires, ignoring the fact that they are the main cause of the deterioration of forests. The Forestry Action Plan must contain provision for a possible European Fire Fund or European Forest Fund which could be used to support action intended to conserve and restore the mountain and forest areas included in the Natura 2000 network.

Since many areas have witnessed a very high rate of forest degradation over the last few years, Parliament called on the Commission to devise schemes which would enable the forests in such areas to be replanted with native species, thereby ensuring that the objectives of ecosystem recovery and the prevention of further disasters are adopted in the public interest and not just as a private initiative, and that the effect of disasters on climate change is reduced.

Parliament called for the creation of a "European Civil Protection Force", stating that such a European mechanism should be alert during the summer season, when Europe and especially the Mediterranean countries are always under the threat of fires, and that each Member State could contribute to this European mechanism by providing equipment, means and personnel.

The EUSF should continue to enable action to be taken in the case of disasters which, although significant, do not achieve the minimum level required. Assistance may also be provided in special circumstances in cases where most of the population in a specific region has been affected by a disaster which will have serious effects on their living conditions.

Finally, Parliament asked that the setting up of an agriculture disaster fund be looked into for the purpose of providing compensation for any loss of income stemming from crop losses on the part of farmers affected by natural disasters.