Natural disasters, fires, floods and droughts: environmental aspects

2005/2192(INI) - 18/05/2006 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Edite **ESTRELA** (PES, PT) on the environmental aspects of natural disasters (fires, droughts and floods) by 450 votes in favour 38 against and 13. (This resolution is closely linked to two other resolutions adopted at the same time, on the regional and agricultural aspects respectively, of natural disasters. Please see INI /2005/2193 and INI/2005/2195.)

Parliament stated that climate change was causing and intensifying extreme weather events and natural disasters (flooding, extreme droughts and fires) which had been occurring in ever more rapid succession throughout the world. Forests and agriculture played a fundamental role in environmental conservation, in terms of the balances generated in both the carbon and the hydrological cycles, whose contribution to slowing down global warming, avoiding erosion, preventing the effects of torrential rain and moderating the greenhouse effect is incalculable. The number and scale of floods in Europe, including Central and Eastern Europe, has grown considerably, and efforts must be made to improve forecasting and prevention. Measures currently in force in the EU had been shown to be insufficient or inadequate in terms of providing an effective response to natural disasters.

In consequence, Parliament highlighted the following measures to be taken:

- measures to ensure more efficient use of water be taken within the EU. Major water consumers in agriculture, tourism**,** towns and industry must be targeted by these measures. Parliament advocated the application of the "user pays" and "polluter pays" principles so as to guarantee a more rational use of water and better monitoring and inspection of effluents;

- awareness-raising campaigns in respect of prevention, adoption of good practice and the publicising of procedures to be adopted in disaster situations such as fires and floods, to be funded by the European Social Fund or within the context of specific programmes such as Forest Focus;

- Member States should increase their cooperation on civil protection at European Union level, so as to ensure availability of additional resources for rapid action to combat emergency situations;

- better use of the Structural and Cohesion Funds for structural measures to prevent drought, the main aggravating factor in natural disasters. Parliament also felt that incentives should be provided for forest conservation and management of the countryside so as to establish a variety of uses (forestry, grazing, arable crops, irrigation, etc.). Monoculture should be practised only in clearly circumscribed areas particularly well suited to the species concerned and the related economic activities;

- the Solidarity Fund Regulation 2012/2002/EC contained prior conditions which make it difficult to use the Fund in certain disaster situations. The Commission was asked to set solidarity-based objectives within the joint legislative framework on tackling and preventing natural disasters, and particularly the adoption of the new Regulation on the Solidarity Fund and the Directive on assessing and managing floods. Furthermore, within the forthcoming revision of the Forest Focus programme, it must consider increasing funding and making the rules governing application more flexible. Severe drought should be included amongst the Solidarity Fund support mechanisms;

- the reconstruction/restoration of the Natura 2000 network areas damaged by flooding, drought or fires should be financed by the Community Funds; Member States should establish national forest funds for forest disaster prevention and forest renewal;

- Parliament recommended the establishment of a European observatory on drought, desertification, floods and other effects of climate change in order to gather information and ensure a more effective response;

- measures to protect forests against fire, specifically the collection and recycling of forest biomass residue, the prohibition of changing the use of burnt land, and sharper penalties for criminal acts against the environment, especially causing forest fires;

- finally, the Commission was asked for a directive on preventing and managing fires, to include the regular collection of data, preparation of maps and identification of areas at risk, preparation of fire risk management plans, identification by the Member States of the resources allocated and facilities available, coordination of the various administrations, minimum requirements for training crews, establishment of environmental responsibility and penalties.