



Conference ‘Forest fires in Southern Europe – From prevention to restoration’ (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Slovenia and Cyprus) **in Brussels, 24-25 January 2005**

Recognizing that:

- The European Union has already in place many policy instruments aiming to support Member States in their fight against forest fires in different stages. Due mainly to the lack of a common forest policy the measures put in place are shared between different Commission services, sectors and actors.
- Each Member State has its own specific problems and policy related to forest fires that during the conference have been widely illustrated from different points of view and levels, governmental and not, national and local ones. Many experiences, criticisms and suggestions coming from the ground have been expressed and the social nature of this phenomenon has been broadly stressed.
- Forest fires belong to the history of the mankind as they are mainly a man-made event. In Southern Europe they are a cyclical problem clearly showing a trend: while the number of fires is increasing, the average size of each fire is decreasing. This can be considered just as a first result of the policies put in place at different level.
- There are many concerns for the future, mainly in relation to climate change and desertification where forest fires can play a significant role.

We recommend that:

1. The visibility of the forest has to be increased, especially in the countries where they play a lower economic role although having relevant environmental and social values;
2. Forest policy has to be raised on the political agenda also to reduce, as much as possible, the competition for funding existing with other policies; this because the effects of forest fires are a common problem that can affect everybody all round the year that is likely to further increase during next years;
3. Prevention has to be recognised as representing the only viable and cost-effective way to avoid irreversible losses affecting directly forests and less directly all the society;
4. Concerning suppression, high priority has to be given to the rapid interventions on fire outbreaks before their spread, possible only if there is a good development at local level of preventive measures as systems of survey and alert;
5. A better coordination between the actors involved in the fight to forest fires and a bigger coherence between the different policies and measures have to be put in place as soon as possible; the approach must become global, dynamic and more interactive;

6. The important role of the civil society has to be acknowledged, in particular the non-governmental organisations that have to be supported in their tasks;
7. Participation of the public and private forest owners in the definition and implementation of a prevention policy has to be intensified because they are the main stakeholders in the problem of forest fires;
8. The contacts with non-governmental organisations, groups of citizens and civil society in general have to be intensified in order to learn from their experiences and to involve the local people more responsibly in a sustainable forest management;
9. The role of the media which should raise further awareness in relation to forest prevention and not only to active fighting has to be stressed;
10. The European Commission will further investigate about how to establish a more stringent framework for forest policy in general and for forest fire prevention in particular (e. g. through the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and Council on the evaluation of the EU forestry strategy currently under preparation);
11. EU and national policies and financial tools should include the crucial role of prevention against forest fire (i.e. an European strategy in the future framework provided by the new Rural Development Regulation and LIFE+ or as wished by several speakers a specific regulation on forest fire prevention);
12. EU and national programmes should support also measures to reduce the departure of the population and consequent abandon of rural areas, especially by finding new ways to valorise forests and forests products in the area of the rural development;
13. Member States use all available source of financing to boost prevention and protection from fires, protecting at the first place Natura 2000 and other relevant protected sites and the whole woodland areas because of their global environmental functions;
14. Sensitive sites of existing biodiversity need adequate protection and measures in well-enforced management plans, using zoning and monitoring techniques to clearly demarcate human settlement and natural ecosystems.
15. A national legislation aiming to limit the fire causes and providing criminal sanctions has to be supported and fully developed;
16. The restoration of indigenous forest reproductive material is essential, such as the use of cork oaks in large parts of Portugal.
17. Increase the visibility and fully exploit the possibilities offered by the MIC (Monitoring and Information centre of the civil protection managed by the European Commission);
18. Through the awareness of the European Social Fund actions and training should be provided to the stakeholders.

The views expressed are purely those of the conference participants and may not in any circumstance be regarded as stating an official position of the European Commission.