

Forest fires and the Civil Protection and Environmental Accidents Unit of the European Commission

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The European Commission's Directorate-general Environment is composed of 24 units amongst which the unit "Civil protection and environmental accidents" plays a special role. Civil protection relating questions that are to be treated on European level are based on article 308 of the Treaty establishing the European Union, whilst purely environmental policy is based on article 175. Thus, civil protection action may only be developed when unanimity is reached amongst the Member States and when it strictly respects the principle of subsidiarity.

Community cooperation in the field of civil protection

Since 1985 the Council of the European Union adopted several resolutions concerning Community cooperation in the field of civil protection. On this base, and with the collaboration of the Permanent Network of National Correspondents for Civil Protection (PNNC), the European Commission launched a series of initiatives aimed at improving the Member States' preparation to face natural and technological disasters. The Council Resolution of 8 July 1991 concerning the improvement for mutual assistance was an important first step towards a formulation of a real operational structure covering all kind of disasters.

To identify the civil protection actors at European level and to maintain direct contacts to them, the Commission service competent for civil protection questions developed the Operational Manual for civil protection. This is a regularly updated compendium of competent civil protection staff and resources for all the countries of the European Economic Area as well as for the current candidate countries. In its chapter "human resources and entry points" the cooperation officers for forest fires and in the chapter "register of means" the aerial means for forest firefighting are listed for each country. Under certain conditions, the cooperation officers for forest fires may be send on scene in the case of major fires. The European Community could support such missions.

As mentioned above, the Community cooperation in the field of civil protection, including forest fires as a permanent threat to Member States, is an initiative carried out under the strict respect of the principle of subsidiarity. Thus, only where the Community can provide for an added value, it may intervene in order to supplement the efforts undertaken at national, regional and local level.

As an excellent example, the Community cooperation in the field of forest fires may be evoked here. The forest fire expert group may be considered as being the heart of

this cooperation. It carries out an important activity in the field of forest fire fighting. The group is composed by experts from Greece, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany and Finland and it meets regularly twice a year. The forest fire expert group aims at looking for a close cooperation between the operational firefighting centres of the Member States by improving information on daily risk levels and on statistics on forest fires, as well as to exchange experiences on forest firefighting. It meets regularly in Brussels or Ispra/Italy for information purposes and for improving the European Forest Fire Information System developed so far by the Commission's Joint Research Centre, in support of civil protection related mutual assistance between Member States.

The Community action programme for civil protection

The first Community action programme for civil protection (1998/1999) laid the ground for a financial Community support of a series of actions and projects proposed by the Member States and agreed upon by a Management committee.

The second and current Community action programme (2000-2004) also allows for an important spectrum of actions to complement and support Member States' efforts for civil protection actions. It is in this programme that the present workshop is embedded. Under the same programme, major projects have been identified, such as projects on prevention, information of the public, new technologies, communication during crisis, disaster medicine. Moreover, a system of exchange of experts helps to instruct national experts on how and under what conditions their counterparts in other Member States are working.

European forest fire policy support within the European Commission

Such support is mainly provided by Directorate-general Agriculture (prevention aspects) and Directorate-general Environment (forest firefighting). For both of them, Directorate-general Joint Research Centre provides the necessary scientific and technical support.

However, major forest fire research projects are developed under the European Commission's Directorate-general Research and Directorate-general Information Society.

As a result of the European Parliament's complaint in favour of a change of competencies for forestry, forestry issues relating to environment have in future to be dealt with by DG Environment instead of DG Agriculture. Since Regulation (EEC) No 2158/92 expires in December 2002, DG Environment will take over, amongst other forest monitoring tasks, the forest fire information system. In that context, a new framework regulation will be established soon. Besides atmospheric pollution and forest fires, it will also cover other environmental themes such as bio-diversity, carbon storage, effects of climate change, forest soils and sustainable forest management in general.

The Council Decision establishing a Community mechanism to facilitate reinforced cooperation in civil protection assistance interventions will enter into force in January 2002. It supplements the Community action programme, makes support available for urgent response action and facilitates the mobilisation of intervention teams and experts, taking into account also the special needs of geographically isolated regions of the Community.

The creation of a monitoring and information centre and of a common emergency communication and information system will be two key elements of the new mechanism. The mechanism will establish the capacity to mobilise and dispatch, as quickly as possible, small teams of experts responsible for assessing the situation and facilitating the coordination of assistance operations.

Other Commission activities in the field of forest fires

A Second Report on forest fires in Southern Europe will be prepared and be published in the spring of 2002. It will contain summarised statistics on Southern European forest fires during the 2001 season. It will explain what improvements have been done in the definition of daily risk indices and, in general, it will represent a useful compendium of the fire situation in the Member States. DG Environment and DG JRC jointly draft the report.

A workshop of NEDIES (NEDIES: Natural and Environmental Disaster Information Exchange System <http://nedies.jrc.it>) will be organised by DG Joint Research Centre on 23 and 24 May 2002. It will focus on “Lessons learnt from significant forest fires that occurred in Europe”. Forest fire experts from the Member States and from third countries to the European Union will contribute and share their experiences. The final result of the workshop will be a report on lessons learnt available for all interested persons (operational centres, experts, decision-makers...).

And of course, the present workshop on “Improving dispatch for forest fire control”, we are now to hold at the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania, Crete from 6 to 8 December 2001, will contribute substantially in formulating future improvements in forest firefighting operations and thus it will help saving resources in times of high fire risks in Southern Europe. The results of this workshop will be widely disseminated and they should aim at improving the actual knowledge needed for handling in particular major fires. It became necessary to offer this unique opportunity to the European firefighting operators, to the European Research sector and to policy-makers to exchange their expertise and to adapt their resources to the constantly changing conditions under which new strategies have to be developed. The Commission’s services competent for forest fire cooperation are confident that the Greek General Secretariat for civil protection will reach its objective in this context and they express their gratitude to the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania for arranging the holding of the workshop.