



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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NOTE

from: General Secretariat
to: Delegations
Subject: Drought in Portugal
- Information from the Portuguese delegation

Delegations will find annexed an information note from the Portuguese delegation on the above mentioned subject, which will be dealt with under "other business" at the Environment Council meeting on 9 March 2012.

Drought in Portugal

- Information from the Portuguese delegation -

Portugal would like to draw the attention of our European colleagues to the occurrence of yet another drought episode in our country.

In recent months, Portugal has seen much lower rain levels than usual for this time of the year, with 70% of the continental territory in a state of severe drought as of 15 February. The drought threatens agriculture and the fragile natural values of the Mediterranean region, including key ecological corridors. Declining plant productivity caused by lack of water confronts grazing livestock farms with an immediate problem. If the situation is prolonged, it could lead to the over-exploitation of natural resources and an increased load on fragile ecosystems. Therefore, besides the underlying economic effects, there is also the potential risk of immediately endangering environmental values, as well as the need to maintain more threatened species.

But this is no isolated case. Over the last 30 years, and including the current year, Portugal has declared a drought on 6 occasions. The theme has been tabled at the Environment Council several times, in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2010. At the last of these (June 2010), the Council acknowledged that water scarcity and drought constituted serious problems in many of Europe's regions and invited the European Commission (EC) to analyse the most suitable combination of measures and financial instruments to deal with these phenomena, and to submit relevant proposals, as appropriate.

The EC is currently developing a *Blueprint to Safeguard European Waters*, one of the main pillars of which is a revised European strategy on water scarcity and drought, recommended in the EC Communication on this matter, for 2012.

Notwithstanding the actions taken so far, we consider it crucial to appeal to our European partners again, as in similar events since 2006, to find an urgent and imperative EU-wide, integrated and adequate response to this specific problem that will enable us to give Europe's citizens a sign that their governments and the European Union are working towards the right and appropriate measures to respond to this serious problem. It must also be stressed, as a matter of urgency, that this problem is of even greater importance when placed in the context of the global framework for climate change adaptation.

Therefore, it is important to reiterate and emphasise that:

- In terms of scale, drought is not just a local problem but affects various regions of Europe, as recognised by the 2010 monitoring report;
- Its environmental and socio-economic impacts are significant and require an adequate response on the European Union's part. Some of these effects are already being felt in Portugal, particularly animal feed scarcity, rising animal feed prices, a fall in grain production, and an increased number of forest fires;
- Drought must be managed from an integrated perspective that enables measures of a structural nature, including prevention, to be defined, and which are complemented by short-term actions, with the gradual mobilisation of resources and support for populations. In other words, it is crucial to move from a crisis management approach to a system of risk management;
- Climate change will result in an increase in the frequency and intensity of these phenomena, therefore it is vital that this problem be integrated into adaptation strategies, specifically by boosting measures that enhance efficient water usage at every level, and an inter-annual strategy for controlling the availability of existing water resources, which implies boosting water storage and distribution capacity;
- There is a close relationship between drought situations, soil degradation and desertification, especially in semi-arid regions, in terms of the direct impact on the performance of the soil's functions; equally, there are greater consequences in terms of the risk of forest fires and of the significant effects stemming from them in the form of atmospheric pollution and greenhouse gas emissions;

- Financing for the prevention and natural management of risks, like those currently affecting Portugal and other European countries, under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020, is key to conserving natural resources and supporting the implementation of the water scarcity and drought integrated response strategy, bearing in mind the concerns and needs of the different sectoral users in particular. It is also important for ensuring the resilience of ecosystems by endowing them with the strengthened capacity to withstand the effects of climate change and natural catastrophes. We therefore consider it of greatest urgency to enshrine these areas of intervention in the next financial programming cycle, in line with that already proposed by the European Commission.
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