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Committee on Budgetary Control

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WORKING DOCUMENT

on the European Court of Auditors' Special Report No 24/2014 (2014 Discharge): Is EU support for preventing and restoring damage to forests caused by fire and natural disasters well managed?

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Rapporteur: Joachim Zeller

Introduction

More than 40% of the EU territory is covered by forests, which is more than land used for agricultural purposes. European forests are threatened by fire and other natural disasters, such as windstorms, droughts, floods, avalanches, pests, diseases etc.

The EU has a long history of contributing to forest protection, in particular to fire prevention. Since 2000 forest protection has been included in the rural development policy. In the period 2007-13 the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) support for restoring forests damaged by natural disasters and fire, as well as for introducing preventive actions, was available through measure 226. At the end of 2012 the total EAFRD support planned for actions under measure 226 was around 1.55 billion euro.

ECA findings

The ECA arrived at the conclusion that:

- The support was not sufficiently well managed and that the Commission and Member States cannot demonstrate that the intended results were achieved in a cost-effective way;
- Actions were found which were not appropriate to achieve the objectives of the measure 226;
- The Commission does not issue specific guidelines on the fire risk classification in order to promote best practices and ensure the comparability and reliability of Member States' fire risk analyses;
- The weaknesses identified are likely to persist in the period 2014-2020 since the new proposed monitoring tools have not improved the monitoring framework for this specific support;

ECA recommendations

In light of its findings the ECA recommended that the Commission should:

1. Verify, during the approval of the Member States' Rural Development Programs (RDP) concerning the period 2014-2020, that the needs for preventive actions in the forests areas where public support is envisaged are adequately described and justified;
2. Set out common basic criteria to differentiate forest areas to be classified as low, medium and high fire risk;
3. Clarify requirements for the actions to be supported under measure 226 to ensure that they contribute significantly to the prevention of fire and natural disasters, in particular when they are part of a profitable economic activity and as such could also be financed under Axis 1 - improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector;
4. Improve its monitoring of the measures to ensure that the Member States implement it in line with the specific objectives set.

In light of its findings the ECA recommended that the Member States should:

1. Select the prevention actions based on explicit criteria aligned with the needs and after a thorough and documented evaluation process;
2. Enhance the environmental protective impact of the support by prioritising the actions in the environmentally most valuable forests such as Natura 2000 forest areas;
3. Ensure that only actions linked to natural disasters or fires are supported;
4. Establish a control system which can ensure effective verification of compliance with the terms under which support is granted, and maintenance of appropriate documents or information;
5. Pay greater attention to environmental considerations related to the actions supported, in particular by establishing appropriate safeguards to prevent environmental counter-effects;
6. Ensure that the standard costs established for the actions supported are reasonable;
7. Justify the ceiling for support - and any change to it - on the basis of the costs normally incurred by the beneficiaries;
8. Require beneficiaries to clearly demonstrate their need for the support under measure 226;
9. Report on the effects of the actions carried out in terms of reduction of the number of fires or natural disasters and of the area damaged.

Recommendations by the rapporteur for possible inclusion in the 2014 Commission discharge report

1. Calls on the Commission to establish common criteria to identify the scale of fire risk in European forests, in order to end the arbitrary and inconsistent definition of high fire risk areas and therewith the deficient evaluation and selection process by Member States;
2. Urges the Member States to select its preventive actions according to the actual needs of fire risk and in line with the requirements of measure 226 instead of other environmental or economic objectives; insists in this regard on the necessity for beneficiaries to prove unconditionally and document accurately their need for support under this measure; enhances the Court's recommendation of prioritising actions in environmentally most valuable forests such as Natura 2000 forest areas;
3. In view of the alarming findings of the Court regarding standard costs for similar actions in different regions, demands a reasonable and verifiable ceiling for support and an unconditional justification in case of any change to it;
4. Invites the Member States to better coordinate and structure their forest fires policies; supports the creation of a European platform for beneficiaries to share and promote best practices;

5. Deplores especially the Court's outlook of continued severe deficiencies in the period 2014-2020 due to the constantly poor monitoring framework; urges the Commission to take immediate actions to improve its monitoring and control system;
6. Insists in addition that Member States establish a sound control system including the requirement of retaining the relevant documents and information; calls in this regard on the Commission to ensure that support is only granted where Member States have established such an appropriate and reviewable control system;
7. Calls on the Member States to regularly report on the effects of the actions carried out and the reductions of the number of fires or natural disasters and the area damaged.