

WRITTEN QUESTION E-2145/03
by Reinhold Messner (Verts/ALE)
to the Commission

Subject: Preservation of the Tagliamento (Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy) as a wild river

In order to protect the town of Latisana, situated in the canalised lower reaches of the Tagliamento river, a 14 km² flood control reservoir is to be built in the middle course by removing around 30m m³ of river gravel.

The Tagliamento forms the last expanse of wild river landscape in the whole of the Alpine region. For this reason, Italy applied for the section of the river in question to be registered as an FFH and Special Protection Area in accordance with EU Directives 92/43/EEG¹ and 79/409/EEG².

If this flood protection project is carried out, the diverging waters (furcation), whose form changes with every flood, will be replaced with a single channel. This will obstruct the route along the river for wildlife. The large and previously shifting gravel deposits will grow in size (succession) and the bed of the Tagliamento will deepen. This will have far-reaching limnological and environmental consequences for the river meadows and the flora and fauna (e.g. more than 30 species of fish and 14 species of amphibian) that inhabit them, upstream and especially downstream from the reservoir. In addition to the permanent removal of gravel from the flood reservoir, downstream river works such as transverse structures will be necessary to counteract the deepening of the river and the consequent lowering of the ground-water level.

That flood protection is taken very seriously in Italy is to be welcomed. However, the devastating floods in Germany and large parts of Europe over the last few years have led to a change in thinking as far as flood protection is concerned. Constructions are now being avoided, with the focus on providing additional flood retention plains. On top of that, the EU's Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC³) commits all Member States to achieving 'good status' for all bodies of water. Moreover, Italy signed the internationally binding Alpine Convention in 1991, in which the Alpine states pledged their commitment to greater environmental and water protection. The Friuli-Venezia Giulia region is also under serious threat from earthquakes, and so a full flood reservoir of this size presents an almost incalculable risk.

Can the Commission ensure that the Tagliamento's ecosystem will be protected and that alternative flood protection measures will be considered? Can the Commission monitor whether the project is carried out in conformity with the Habitat, the Birds and the Environmental Impact Assessment Directives? Does the Commission believe that that a project of this kind is compatible with the clause in the Water Framework Directive concerning the maintenance of a good water status?

¹ OJ L 206, 22.7.1992, p. 7.

² OJ L 103, 25.4.1979, p. 1.

³ OJ L 237, 22.12.2000, p.1.