

WRITTEN QUESTION E-3374/07

by Stavros Arnautakis (PSE), Claudio Fava (PSE), Iratxe García Pérez (PSE) and María Sornosa Martínez (PSE)
to the Commission

Subject: Protection of Mediterranean palm groves

The palm groves of Europe are an essential feature of the continent's biodiversity and cultural heritage, which have a direct bearing on the local ecotourism economy.

Serious concerns have been raised by the arrival of a species of palm weevil from the tropical countries of Asia. According to the National Agricultural Research Foundation, the insect is the *Rynchophorus ferrugineus* (red palm weevil, RPW), Coleoptera: Curculionidae, which has swiftly spread to Oman, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel. In 1993, it also invaded Europe (so far destroying 12,000 palm trees in Spain), arriving in Italy (Catania) in 1999 and Greece in 2006. Its rapid spread constitutes a threat to the Elsche palm grove in the Valencia region, which has been a UNESCO world heritage site since 2000, the Vai palm grove, and another nine regions in Crete incorporated in the Natura 2000 EU Network (Directive 92/43/EEC (Annexes II/IV)¹), which is home to the *Phoenix Theophrasti*, a unique species of palm which is protected by presidential decree (70/1989).

Although the RWP is not covered by Directive 2000/29/EC², the recent Commission decision (CEC Draft, March 2007) includes this destroying insect on the list of invading insects causing catastrophic damage, without, however, proposing preventive and combative measures. Nevertheless, there are, in fact, inherent risks of causing disruption to the ecosystem in using chemical means alone to combat the weevil, and there are sound ecological reasons for using environmentally friendly methods. Moreover, inadequate plant health checks during importation of palm trees from Africa and Asia increase the risk of an invasion by other dangerous pests.

Will the Commission say whether it intends:

1. to propose measures and methods of combating this insect in order to prevent it from spreading and destroying precious heritage;
2. to finance programmes for the development of environmentally friendly methods of combating this insect; and
3. to strengthen plant health checks on palm trees imported from third countries?

¹ OJ L 206, 22.7.1992, p. 7.

² OJ L 169, 10.7.2000, p. 1.