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Drought in Portugal

European Parliament resolution on the drought in Portugal

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 2 and Article 6 of the EC Treaty, pursuant to which environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the Community's policies for various sectors with the objective of environmentally sustainable economic development,
 - having regard to Article 174 of the EC Treaty,
 - having regard to the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) of December 1997 and the EC's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol on 4 March 2002,
 - having regard to the Commission report on Climate Change and the European Water Dimension,
 - having regard to Rule 103(2) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas southern Europe, and particularly the Iberian peninsula, has suffered from many severe droughts in the last few years,
- B. whereas the absence of precipitation in Portugal between 1 October 2004 and the end of March 2005, with rainfall less than 50% of the average between 1961 and 1990, has been causing extremely low levels of ground water, less than 20% in some southern areas of the country,
- C. whereas on 15 March 2005 almost 88% of mainland Portugal was experiencing severe or even extreme drought and whereas a few days of light rainfall have not been sufficient to alter the situation to an adequate extent,
- D. whereas the effects of the water shortage are being felt, with serious socio-economic repercussions, in agriculture, in livestock rearing, in forestry - with very slight or non-existent development of plant growth, in particular for cereals, forage crops and natural meadows, jeopardising harvests of straw and cereals and causing an enormous shortage of animal feed, the stocks of which are exhausted - in human consumption, in the environment, in national health care and hence in tourism, which is a major Portuguese industry,
- E. whereas between May and the beginning of autumn there will be no new precipitation and hence it will be necessary to continue to feed animals not only during summer but also during the coming winter,

- F. whereas the people who are most directly affected are those who have the lowest levels of financial resources, and whereas the direct effects are compounded by the consequences for spring crops - which are jeopardised by the low level of water stored in the main reservoirs - as well as by the increased risk of summer fires, which already occur on a disastrous scale, as was particularly the case in 2003,
- G. whereas, according to research carried out into the projected impact of the drought over the next eleven months, a loss of 34% in net added value is estimated, and losses of as much as 40% may occur in the worst-hit areas of the south,
- H. considering that the persistent drought in Portugal is further evidence of the adverse effects of climate change, and emphasising that this is another sign of the need for ambitious worldwide action to halt climate change; whereas the EU should continue to play a leading role in this process and step up its efforts in the key fields of the environment, energy and transport,
1. Expresses its sympathy with the populations and sectors affected, and expresses its concern at the situation currently affecting Portuguese farmers and livestock breeders and also the regions which are experiencing a water shortage, the situation in the central and southern parts of the country being particularly serious;
 2. Considers that Community intervention is called for, though not solely in order to provide support for those most affected; efforts must also be made to limit the damage and prevent similar situations in the future from having such devastating effects; in this connection and on the basis of the information already supplied by the Portuguese authorities, urges the Commission to:
 - ensure that the full amount of the agricultural aid due to farmers is paid in advance;
 - facilitate, in accordance with the Community legislation and following the example of action in similar situations in the past, the mobilisation of cereals from Community intervention stocks resulting from the surpluses in some Member States,
 - give its backing to the veterinary tasks listed in the contingency plan to tackle the 'blue tongue' disease which broke out at the same time as the drought and which, because the movement of animals was restricted, aggravated the situation enormously;
 - grant derogations from the application of a number of Community regulations, in particular authorisation for grazing in set-aside zones or areas planted with cereals, which it will be impossible to harvest because the production cycle has been affected;
 - authorise the Portuguese authorities to grant the state aid required by the situation, especially to small farmers, in particular in order to provide support for the exceptional costs incurred in feeding animals and transporting or collecting water, or the other activities worst affected, such as potato and citrus production;

- submit to the Council and Parliament a proposal for revision of the legal instruments with a view to adapting the existing legislation so that it can be used to help prevent such serious effects from recurring in any subsequent years of repeated drought in southern Europe;
- 3. Alerts the Commission and Council to the immediate need for funding to be made available and resources marshalled in order to enable action to be taken in good time to prevent a higher number of forest fires from occurring next summer on account of the drought;
- 4. Welcomes the Commission's Communication on risk and crisis management in agriculture (COM(2005)0074), and encourages the Commission and Council to take urgent action in response to it so as to establish, as swiftly as possible, an effective Community protection system to safeguard European farmers against risks and crises such as those resulting from the current drought in Portugal; believes it is necessary to introduce a public form of agricultural insurance, financed from Community funds, so as to guarantee a minimum income for farmers in cases of public disasters such as drought and fires;
- 5. Believes it is necessary to obtain a heading providing for financial support to minimise the increase in costs and reduction in agricultural production, as well as a temporary exemption from social security contributions (with no loss of rights) for full-time farmers with incomes under 12 ESU, together with the prolongation of the harvest credit, for two years and interest-free;
- 6. Calls on the Council and Commission to reconsider the possibility of drawing on the Solidarity Fund, and, in particular, of ensuring that the fund can also be used in response to situations of this kind, which are particularly frequent in southern Europe;
- 7. Calls on the Commission to take initiatives to ensure respect for the Kyoto commitments;
- 8. Urges the Commission to carry out an in-depth study into the occurrence of such phenomena in order to determine whether they are cyclical or occasional in nature, or whether they are a further indicator of long-term climate change, and to explore options for a post-2012 agreement in the UN climate change process, together with the development of a long-term EU strategy, considering emission reductions by 2020 as a lead for the developed countries to follow; insists that the EU should retain its leading role in international efforts to tackle climate change and present concrete proposals for strategic action beyond 2012;
- 9. Notes with interest the recent Commission report on the global phenomenon of climate change and its direct effect on water supply and quality and on ecosystems; welcomes in particular the proposal to provide relevant input to EU water policymakers on the impacts on the water sector (agriculture, urban centres, industrial and energy sectors, civil protection, spatial planning) under climate change scenarios;
- 10. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Portuguese Parliament and Government, and the local authorities in the areas affected.