Recommendation 1045 (1986)[1]

Combating forest fires in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

The Assembly,

1. Alarmed at the increase in the number of major forest fires in Europe in recent years, especially along the Mediterranean coast ;

2. Considering the enormous damage caused by such fires, resulting in loss of human life, soilerosion, economic sacrifices of forest developers and others through the destruction of timber and property, hesitation against future forestry investment and a reduction in tourism ;

3. Considering that forest fires constitute a genuine ecological disaster, by reason not only of the devastation of flora and fauna which they cause, but also of the increased erosion to which the destruction of vegetation gives rise ;

4. Noting that the problem is particularly acute in Southern Europe where forests, apart from protecting the environment, are also of considerable economic importance to populations in disadvantaged rural areas ;

5. Noting that rural depopulation in Europe in the last twenty years has left forests in a neglected state which encourages the spread of fires ;

6. Recognising that the issue has become so grave as to transcend national borders, and that it now threatens the very survival of a part of the European environment which the Parliamentary Assembly has done so much in the past to protect ;

7. Noting that, although forest fires may start spontaneously in certain cases, the large majority are caused by man and due either to carelessness or criminal intent -for instance as a revenge against society, in retaliation for perceived wrongs, or in order to further specific economic interests ;

8. Considering that it is necessary to introduce prevention-orientated development policies, and to encourage forest regeneration ;

9. Emphasising the vital role which must be played in any prevention policy by schools, in developing children's interest in forests, and by the media, in informing, motivating and educating the public at large ;

10. Considering that, for effective action to prevent and combat fires, co-operation and co-ordination between local, regional and government authorities are essential at both national and transfrontier level ;

11. Considering that, when land-use plans are being drawn up or reviewed, local authorities must play a priority part in prevention, particularly by defining high-risk areas and forbidding all building projects on sites ravaged by fire ;

12. Recalling that protection, restoration and improvement of forests can help to create employment in rural areas ;

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1. Assembly debate on 22 September 1986 (15th Sitting) (see Doc. 5639, report of the Committee on Agriculture, and Doc. 5640,opinion of the Committee on the Environment, Regional Planning and Local Authorities). Text adopted by the Assembly on 22 September 1986 (15th Sitting).

13. Considering that the proposals which it made in Recommendation 1036 (1986) on preventive action and protection against natural hazards in the Mediterranean basin are fully applicable to forest fires,

14. Recommends that the Committee of Ministers :

14.1. give special priority to the Assembly's proposals in Recommendation 1036 (1986) and Recommendation 1042 (1986) on protection of the cultural heritage against disasters, and particularly to the conclusion of an international legal instrument allowing the states of Southern Europe to increase their co-operation effectively in cases of natural disaster ;

14.2. make a study of the effects of fires on forests and other ecosystems ;

15. Recommends that the Committee of Ministers urge governments of member states, and especially those of Southern Europe :

15.1. to increase urgently the means for preventing and fighting forest fires, as well as for assisting communities in distress, especially in reforesting affected areas ;

15.2. to promote international co-operation at European level, aiming at :

a. an improved system for the exchange of information about and research into all aspects of the prevention of and struggle against forest fires, including their causes ;

b. harmonisation of short-term and long-term strategies for the struggle against fires, including principles for ‘‘preventive forestry management'', training of personnel, modernisation of equipment such as aircraft, and joint action in the event of major catastrophes ;

c. The greatest possible harmonisation of their national legislations, while taking into account the specific circumstances of each country ;

15.3. to encourage private forest owners, whose holdings have been particularly affected in recent years, to show greater responsibility as regards preventive management and reforestation, and to support them financially, where appropriate, for the elimination of undergrowth, the creation of fire-breaks, etc. ;

15.4. to ensure co-ordination of effort of local, regional and national authorities concerned, and to strive to harmonise the various, often conflicting, economic interests that stand to benefit from healthy forests ;

15.5. to lay special emphasis on informing the public about the environmental, recreational and economic value of forests, as well as about the need for greater vigilance to prevent or detect fires at an early stage ;

15.6. to work for the speedy adoption, by the Council of Ministers of the European Community, of the Commission's 1983 proposal for a Community scheme for the protection against forest fires, as urged repeatedly by the European Parliament.