



INFORMAL COUNCIL OF ENVIRONMENT MINISTERS

WATER SCARCITY AND DROUGHT (WS&D)

Presidency Conclusions:

1. Water scarcity and droughts are problems with relevant socio-economic and environmental impacts. These phenomena are not new but their occurrence have been increasing both in intensity and frequency at European level and neighbouring regions in recent years, and consequently countries have been affected at different levels. Therefore, at the Environmental Council of June 2006, some Member States requested European action on Water Scarcity and Droughts.
2. These problems are recognised as a global concern hence the United Nations have highlighted "Coping with Water Scarcity" as the theme of the World Water Day 2007 and consider these as strategic issues and priorities requiring joint action. Droughts and water scarcity are most acute in the driest areas of the world and in developing countries, but developed countries also face this threat at a different level.
3. On July 18th 2007, the European Commission adopted a Communication addressing the challenge of water scarcity and droughts in the European Union. The Communication provides a fundamental and well-developed first set of policy options for future action, within the framework of EU water management principles, policies and objectives. It also states a clear commitment from the EU, as a whole, to jointly establish the adequate conditions to implement the foreseen actions and to develop further knowledge.

4. The full implementation of the Water Framework Directive (hereafter WFD), the EU's flagship Directive on Water Policy, is a major priority. The WFD establishes a framework of great value, innovation and scope for water management in Europe, establishing the tools for achieving the "good" status in all European waters, while encompassing a flexible approach in addressing environmental objectives.
5. In the context of integrated water resources management and sustainable development, some concerns were identified in relation to quantitative aspects with possible implications for the achievement of the environmental objectives set under the WFD. Issues such as floods, water scarcity and droughts have become increasingly important on the technical and political agenda. In recognition of this, the formal adoption of the proposed directive on the assessment and management of floods will occur later this year, and the issues related to water scarcity and droughts are currently under discussion at a political level.
6. Water Scarcity and Droughts have a direct impact on people and economic sectors, such as agriculture, tourism, industry, energy and transport. WS&D have a significant effect on the natural resources available and on the environment as a whole. There is also a close connection between droughts and desertification, particularly in semi-arid regions, with direct impacts upon the performance of soil functions, as well as the influence upon the level of forest fires risk.
7. Water scarcity, on one hand, and drought, on the other, should be considered different matters. Water scarcity should refer to average water imbalances between supply and demand, while droughts, as a natural phenomenon, should refer to important deviations from the average levels of natural water availability. Although it is a natural hazard, drought can be aggravated by Climate Change. It is not possible to control the occurrence of droughts although the resulting impacts may be mitigated to a certain degree, namely through appropriate surveillance and management strategies.

8. Water mismanagement is a fundamental problem, which influences water scarcity and may induce additional impacts when a drought occurs, even if it cannot generate a drought in itself, which is a natural phenomenon. The implementation of the demand side approach must be a clear priority, even though in many circumstances the WS&D impacts might not be solved through that approach alone. The River Basin Management Plans, as established under the WFD, will need to take into account both demand and supply side measures, including seasonal and interannual analysis, and to consider the need for new water supply sources, only when other measures do not suffice. These sources may consist on traditional or alternative options, namely waste water re-use and desalination.
9. A comprehensive approach to address water issues, including, inter alia, the effective implementation of integrated water resources management, the strengthening of water demand management and water saving policies, the integration of sustainable water use concerns by other sectoral policies (e.g. energy production), the valorisation of the aquatic ecosystems and its services, is a fundamental requirement to allow the achievement of the water policy objectives and to move towards sustainable development.
10. The need to pay special attention on adapting agriculture policies to contribute to sustainable water management was emphasized by the Ministers. They welcomed the intention of the Commission to include management of water scarcity in the forthcoming CAP Health Check.
11. Water scarcity issues should be dealt with, as much as possible, through the identification of the appropriate set of measures within the River Basin Management Plans, including the necessary adaptation strategies for climate change. Due to the linkages to the WFD, water resources management in the international river basin districts should be done in a coordinated way.

12. A common approach for drought risk assessment and drought management plans should be adopted by the Commission and the Member States, considering that droughts, with their specific regional characteristics, are a common concern for the Member States and are natural hazards in the same way floods are. Drought management plans should include cross-border coordination, public participation and warning systems, and should be developed at European Union, Member States, River Basin District and local level.
13. Additional work is needed and is currently underway in order to contribute to a more transparent application of the relevant exemptions set under the WFD, in particular the definition of "prolonged droughts" and its impact upon the achievement of the environmental objectives during and after drought periods.
14. The arrangements to set up a European Drought Observatory is considered an important measure, setting the conditions to increase knowledge and improve the preparedness to tackle drought events. This observatory should provide a platform for data collection and research activities, and contribute to a wide exchange of experiences on this issue.
15. Climate change (CC) is expected to influence the baseline of present WS&D issues, with potential impacts on water quantity and quality. A link between WS&D and CC and their associated adaptation strategies should be integrated into the implementation of the WFD as much as possible, including the aspects already dealt with in the EC Green Paper on adaptation to climate change in Europe.
16. The development of a concerted follow-up program to implement the measures identified in the Communication is of crucial importance. The process should bring together Member States and the Commission to exchange information and best practice. Highlighting the political dimension of Drought management, political measures should be considered, taking into account the present Presidency Conclusions,

including legislative action, if needed, considering that research and work on WS&D is still progressing and that further results should be available by 2008.

17. Beyond the direct impacts of drought, there are many indirect effects and correlated phenomena that deserve serious attention. Forest fires are among those issues, as the recent events in Southern Europe clearly prove. Solidarity with those Member States who have been affected by the recent forest fires and with the relatives and families of those who have lost their lives was expressed by the Ministers.

The assistance provided by Member States and the important role played by the Community's Civil Protection Mechanism in co-ordinating this assistance was recognised by Ministers, who called on the Commission to urgently review the scope for supporting Greece in the context of all relevant Community instruments and to strengthen the Community's capacity in the future to prevent and to increase preparedness and the ability to respond and support recovery after such disasters. The Commission was requested to present the results of this review to the Council and to propose if needed additional measures.