BACKGROUND DOCUMENT FOR THE MEETING OF
THE FOREST FIRE PREVENTION EXPERTS
Brussels, 14 May 2004

Introduction

Negative events like fire represent a serious threat for the conservation and sustainable management of the Community’s forests, especially in the Mediterranean area were annually they destroy some 500,000 hectares with a significant impact at environmental, economic and social level. Prevention, active fighting and restoration after fires occurred are the main ways to deal with the problem of forest fires in order to try of contrasting them at different time stages.

More particularly, on forest fire prevention, it has been acknowledged that the nature of forest fires and the need to learn from past experiences requires a co-ordinated approach between relevant parties involved in forest protection and land use management. Since the 80’s, the Community tried to provide an added value to forest fire prevention policies of the Member States by co-financing forest fire prevention actions. A specific Community scheme was approved in 1992 (Regulation (EEC) No2158/92) to support Member States’ efforts to prevent forest fires, especially in the Mediterranean countries, which expired on 31 December 2002. In addition the Council included within the forest chapter of the Rural Development Regulation (EC) 1257/99 the possibility for rural development programmes to co-finance forest fire prevention actions as well as the restoration of forest areas which were destroyed by fire.

The follow-up of the two specific Community actions on forest protection (atmospheric pollution and forest fire prevention) were replaced in 2003 by the Forest Focus scheme (Regulation (EC) No2152/2003). A controversial discussion item in the Council and in the Parliament during the adoption process of Forest Focus was the debate to what extent forest fire prevention measures should be taken up in the Forest Focus regulation without duplicating with the regional rural development actions. The outcome of this discussion has been that the present Forest Focus Regulation offers the same range of measures as the former Regulation (EEC) 2158/92, but with a lower financial envelope and under the condition that the relevant measures are not already included in the approved rural development programmes. Moreover some basic framework conditions such as the concentration on forest fire risk zones as well as the obligation for the Member States to establish forest fire protection plans have not been taken into account by Forest Focus.

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The Joint Research Centre of the Commission (JRC) has in addition established the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) which is providing sound data sets and information on the occurrence of forest fires within the EU. This information system is currently contributing to the forest fire prevention actions within Forest Focus as well as to the Civil Protection actions on the coordination of forest fire fighting.

The duration of Forest Focus regulation is at present time limited to 31 December 2006. The Commission consequently should be prepared to present its ideas on a follow-up action for Forest Focus during the second half of 2005. The setting up of this informal working group, bringing together experts on forest fire prevention activities, aims to elaborate options for a coherent policy framework and set of measures within a follow-up action of Forest Focus which are complementary to the rural development activities and which are taking advantage of the already functioning forest fire information system developed by JRC.

A coherent approach to the problem of forest fire prevention is especially important in the light of an enlarged EU.

**The structure of the meeting**

A. **STATE OF THE ART**: Information on the activities concerning forest fires developed by different services of the Commission;

B. **ORGANISATION OF A WORKPLAN AIMING TO RESPOND TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:**

1. How to use and develop the European Forest Fire Information System established by the JRC in the most efficient way for forest fire prevention activities?

2. Should all EU co-financed forest fire prevention measures be based on a classification of risk zones for forest fires, as it was the case within Regulation (EEC) No 2158/92?

3. What could be the added value of the EU concerning the obligation in the Member States of setting up and implementing forest fire protection plans as a basis for a coherent and integrated forest fire prevention policy?

4. Taking into account the infrastructure investments on regional level covered by the rural development programmes (“actions on the ground”), what type of additional measures should be foreseen in a future specific EU action on forest fire prevention which are complementary to Rural Development and which are justifying a national or cross-regional approach?

Around these four items, it could be envisaged to organise sub-working groups dealing in-depth with specific questions.

C. **SETTING UP OF AN ORGANISATIONAL WORKING STRUCTURE FOR THE EXPERTS**: designation of a chairperson, distribution of tasks among the members of the working group and organisation of the informal network to maintain contacts.