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From: General Secretariat of the Council

To: Delegations

Subject: Strengthening EU early action, preparedness and response to tackle consequences of climate change - a renewed approach for drought management at the EU level

- Information from the Slovenian delegation, supported by the Bulgarian, Greek, Spanish, Cypriot, Austrian and Portuguese delegations

Delegations will find in the Annex an information note from the Slovenian delegation, supported by the Bulgarian, Greek, Spanish, Cypriot, Austrian and Portuguese delegations, on the above subject, to be dealt with under "Any other business" at the Council (Environment) meeting on 24 October 2022.

Strengthening EU early action, preparedness and response to tackle consequences of climate change - a renewed approach for drought management at the EU level

- Information from the Slovenian delegation, supported by the Bulgarian, Greek, Spanish, Cypriot, Austrian and Portuguese delegations -

The effects of climate change are evident, with extreme weather events becoming more frequent and intense, causing economic and natural losses. Extreme weather and climate conditions have caused at least EUR 500 billion in damages over the last 40 years in the EU, with catastrophic heavy rain episodes and floods being the costliest and heat waves being the deadliest weather and climate extremes ¹. Europe has been facing intense droughts that are getting worse each year. Droughts have caused significant damage around Europe, in particular in the agriculture and energy sectors, and affect our societies, economies and ecosystems.

Climate change is here, and it is already significantly affecting us. According to the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S), the summer of 2022 was the hottest summer ever recorded in Europe. This summer, Europe experienced severe heat waves, forest fires, water scarcity and drought episodes, which negatively impacted biodiversity, ecosystems and human health and well-being. Many countries, including Slovenia, were particularly hard-hit by large-scale wild forest fires. According to the data from the Copernicus Emergency Management Service (Copernicus EMS), the record-breaking cumulative burnt area in the EU in July and August 2022 exceeded 425 000 ha ². The European Drought Observatory (EDO) ³, initiated by the European Commission in 2008, reported that in 2022, Europe faced its worst drought in at least 500 years⁴. According to the EDO, in August 2022, more than half of Europe was under warning conditions (deficit of soil water for vegetation) and one sixth of Europe in a state of alert (vegetation under water stress).

¹ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/ims/economic-losses-from-climate-related>

² <https://effis.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

³ <https://edo.jrc.ec.europa.eu/edov2/php/index.php?id=1000>

⁴ https://edo.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/news/GDO-EDODroughtNews202208_Europe.pdf

Drought events already significantly impact many European regions. Water shortages affect agricultural production and in turn agricultural income and farmland value ⁵. Droughts and water scarcity, intensified by competition between agriculture, industry and other sectors, are also beginning to affect the quality of life of urban residents. An insufficient quantity and quality of water can negatively affect the most vulnerable members of society and can contribute to socio- demographic differences within society.

Despite extensive losses and damages for society, the environment and the economy in the last decades, droughts are predominantly addressed as an emergency or crisis situation rather than being approached as a longstanding problem for which long-term, sustainable and systemic solutions should be introduced. Although recently, progress has been noticeable in a number of EU Member States, much more still needs to be done. Systemic and long-term solutions in drought management are particularly important for preserving the quality and quantity of water as a strategic asset. This requires the synchronisation of all relevant policies, resulting in better synergies in responses to water-related challenges.

Drought and water scarcity is mainstreamed (or included) in several legislative acts and sectoral policies. The Water Framework Directive, the Floods Directive, the EU Biodiversity Strategy, the Common Agricultural Policy, the EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy and the Water Reuse Regulation all contribute to addressing water scarcity and droughts. Last year, under the Common Implementation Strategy for the Water Framework Directive, an Ad-hoc Task Group on Water Scarcity and Droughts was set up, with the task of enhancing management of water scarcity and droughts. The EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change ⁶ also focuses on droughts and water scarcity, particularly through systemic adaptation, by promoting nature-based solutions to tackle climate-related impacts, including droughts. A new proposal for a Regulation on nature restoration, which also sets out a holistic and systemic approach, will address water scarcity and droughts by promoting nature as a solution and will support the implementation of nature-based approaches as key in adapting to climate change.

⁵ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/cc-adaptation-agriculture>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/adaptation/what/docs/eu_strategy_2021.pdf

For informed policy-making, access to relevant data, information and knowledge at all geographical levels is crucial. In light of climate change impacts and in line with the EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change, the European Commission launched the European Drought Observatory for Resilience and Adaptation project (EDORA), to enhance drought risk assessment at different scales, aggregate data on impacts in different sectors, and foster the establishment of and connections between drought observatories in Member States. These actions will ultimately enhance resilience and adaptation to droughts across the EU, by offering a common core of operational data and knowledge on droughts.

The Drought Management Centre for Southeastern Europe ⁷, hosted by Slovenia, monitors droughts in the region and provides near real-time information on droughts as a first step in drought management. The recently concluded project ‘Drought risk in the Danube region’ (DriDanube) highlighted a strong need for better coordination and partnership on different levels, which resulted in the regional Danube Drought Strategy. Moreover, the project results confirm that collaboration to strengthen existing partnerships between policymakers and stakeholders in order to gain extra knowledge and exchange good practices should be further encouraged.

A holistic approach to drought management, addressing the full drought management cycle from planning to implementation, is key. Preventive and structural approaches with targeted measures and early responses must be implemented in order to limit the impact and extent of droughts and minimise damage and losses. Early warning systems and early actions provenly reduce the risk of droughts and at the same time increase societal preparedness for climate change. Notwithstanding, the use and implementation of early warning systems should be strengthened and expanded in order to enhance the anticipatory action and support the preparation of long-term plans to tackle drought and a changing climate. A good example of this is in the Alpine region, where, through the ‘Alpine Drought Observatory’ (ADO) project, the countries have established a common tool to empower national drought monitoring and management using remote sensing data, ground observations and modelled data.

⁷ http://www.dmcsee.org/en/drought_monitor/

The issue of drought management and especially of promoting and implementing appropriate prevention measures and stress tests has to be put higher on the EU political agenda. As called for in the 2021 Council Conclusions ⁸, better cross-sectoral coordination and a stronger European approach is needed. All strategic policies and legislation should be effectively coordinated at the EU level to achieve comprehensive and integrated solutions that successfully address water scarcity and drought issues. Stronger coordination at all governance levels from EU to transnational, national and local levels, including monitoring of results and effectiveness of drought measures, is needed. This would enable improved access to knowledge and funding, political commitment, and community engagement, as well as access to the benefits of drought management for all policy areas, such as biodiversity, infrastructure, energy and human health.

A dedicated drought and water scarcity policy at EU level should be developed further to support a sustainable and preventive approach to drought and water scarcity. **Therefore, we call for inclusiveness and rapid action towards a renewed approach for drought management at the EU level, with a focus on all steps in the drought management cycle, encompassing all relevant policy areas.**

⁸ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9419-2021-INIT/en/pdf>