

Environment: Directive on flood risk management comes into force

Reducing the risks and adverse consequences of floods in the European Union is the aim of the new directive on flood risk management coming into force today. The directive requires flood risk management to be negotiated across national borders and contains important commitments to increase transparency and involve citizens. Member States are now obliged to identify river basins and associated coastal areas at risk of flooding and draw up flood risk maps and management plans for these areas.

Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said: "It is important for Member States to prevent the advent of floods and to protect areas which are likely to be affected by such events. It is also vital to prepare European citizens to cope with the potential occurrence of floods. This important new legislation obliges Member States to assess flood risks, to inform citizens in potentially affected areas and to involve them in the planning process."

The effects of floods in Europe

Although floods can play a natural role in revitalising the functioning of ecosystems, they can also cause widespread environmental damage. Pollution transported via flood waters can spread to areas where drinking water is extracted and extreme floods can wreak havoc with delicate ecosystems.

Since 1998 Europe has suffered over 100 major floods, including those along the Danube and Elbe rivers in the summer of 2002. The successive floods of 2005 and 2007 confirmed Europe's increased susceptibility to floods and reinforced the need for action. Since 1998 floods in Europe have caused more than 700 deaths, have displaced more than half a million people and have caused more than €25 billion of damage.

While floods are natural phenomena, human activity such as land development and climate change can increase the likelihood of floods occurring. With appropriate prevention measures the possibility of floods can be reduced and their impact minimised.

A three-stage process

This new directive¹ is an important addition to the European Union's water legislation and has been carefully crafted for compatibility with the Water Framework Directive (WFD). It applies to all types of floods whether they originate from rivers and lakes, or occur in urban and coastal areas, or arise as a result of storm surges and tsunamis.

¹ Directive 2007/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2007 on the assessment and management of flood risks. (Official Journal L 288, 6.11.2007, p.27)

Implementation in the Member States will be done in three stages, beginning with a preliminary assessment of river basin's flood risk and their associated coastal zones to be carried out by 2011.

This is to be followed by the development of flood hazard maps and flood risk maps by 2013. The maps are to identify high-, medium- and low-risk areas, including those areas where occurrences of floods would be considered an extreme event. The maps will also need to include details such as expected water depths, economic activities that could be affected, the numbers of inhabitants at risk and the potential environmental damage.

At the last stage Member States are required to produce flood risk management plans by 2015. These plans are to include measures to reduce the probability of flooding and its consequences. These measures are to focus on preventing unsustainable land use practices by discouraging, for example, building in flood-prone areas. These plans will also need to cover how to protect flood prone areas from the likelihood of floods and reducing their potential impact by restoring flood plains or wetlands. Another important aspect of the flood risk management plans is the need to prepare the public in the event of flooding.

Flood risk assessments will naturally be reviewed and adapted in the light of the effects of climate change and the intensity and frequency of flooding in the long-term.

Transparency and the involvement of citizens are important aspects of the new directive. Member States are obliged to make preliminary flood risk assessments, maps and management plans available to the public. Preparations for flood risk management plans are to be carried out in coordination with public participation in the Water Framework Directive river basin management plans.

Under the directive Member States are obliged to coordinate their activities in shared river basins with other Member States or non-EU countries and are required to not carry out measures that are likely to increase flood risks up- or downstream unless such measures have been agreed with the affected Member State.

More information on flood risk management and other EU water policy can be found at:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/flood_risk/index.htm