



Press Release
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Combating desertification in the EU: steps so far lack coherence, warn auditors

The European Commission does not have a clear picture of the challenges presented by the growing threats of desertification and land degradation in the EU, according to a new report by the European Court of Auditors. The steps taken so far by the Commission and Member States to combat desertification have limited coherence, say the auditors, and the Commission has not assessed progress towards its goal of achieving land degradation neutrality by 2030.

Desertification describes human- and climate-related processes leading to problems affecting dry areas, such as diminished food production, soil infertility, decreases in the land's natural resilience, and reduced water quality. Projections of climate change in Europe show that the risk of desertification is increasing. Hot semi-deserts already exist in southern Europe and the phenomenon is extending northwards. Desertification is a consequence, but also a cause of climate change: soil degradation emits greenhouse gases, and degraded soils have a lower capacity to retain carbon.

Thirteen EU Member States have self-declared under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification that they are affected by desertification. In 2015, the EU and Member States committed to strive to achieve land degradation neutrality in the EU by 2030.

The auditors visited five EU Member States affected by desertification: Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Portugal and Romania, and examined whether the risk of desertification in the EU was being effectively and efficiently addressed.

They found that, while desertification and land degradation are current and growing threats in the EU, the Commission does not have a clear picture of the challenges, and the steps taken to combat desertification have limited coherence.

"We are seeing an increase in droughts, aridity and risk of desertification due to climate change in the EU", said Phil Wynn Owen, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. "Desertification can bring about poverty, health problems due to wind-blown dust, and a decline in biodiversity. It can also have demographic and economic consequences, forcing people to migrate away from affected areas. As auditors, we have a responsibility to draw attention to such risks, which could place growing pressure on public budgets, both at EU and national levels."

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at www.eca.europa.eu.

ECA Press

Mark Rogerson – Spokesperson T: (+352) 4398 47063

Damijan Fišer – Press Officer T: (+352) 4398 45410

12, rue Alcide De Gasperi - L-1615 Luxembourg

E: press@eca.europa.eu @EUAuditors eca.europa.eu

M: (+352) 691 55 30 63

M: (+352) 621 55 22 24

There is no EU-level strategy on desertification and land degradation, say the auditors. Instead, there is a range of strategies, action plans and spending programmes, such as the Common Agricultural Policy, the EU Forest Strategy, and the EU strategy on adaptation to climate change, which are relevant to combating desertification, but do not focus on it.

EU projects related to desertification are also spread across different policy areas – rural development, environment and climate action, research, and regional policy. They can have a positive impact on combating desertification, but there are some concerns about their long-term sustainability.

The Commission and the Member States collect data about various factors with an impact on desertification and land degradation. However, there has not been a full assessment of land degradation at EU level, and no methodology has been agreed to do so. There has been limited coordination between the Member States and the Commission has not provided practical guidance. The Commission has not assessed progress towards meeting the commitment to strive to achieve land degradation neutrality in the EU by 2030.

The auditors recommend:

- establish a methodology to assess the extent of desertification and land degradation in the EU, and, based on this, analyse the relevant data and present it regularly;
- assess the appropriateness of the current legal framework for the sustainable use of soil across the EU, including addressing desertification and land degradation;
- further detail how the EU's commitment to land degradation neutrality will be achieved by 2030, and report regularly on progress;
- provide guidance to Member States on preserving soil and achieving land degradation neutrality in the EU, including dissemination of good practices;
- at their request, provide technical support to Member States to establish national action plans to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030.

Note for Editors

The thirteen EU Member States who self-declared under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) are: Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia.

The ECA presents its special reports to the European Parliament and Council of the EU, as well as to other interested parties such as national parliaments, industry stakeholders and representatives of civil society. The vast majority of the recommendations we make in our reports are put into practice. This high level of take-up underlines the benefit of our work to EU citizens.

Special report 33/2018 "Combating desertification in the EU: a growing threat in need of more action" is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages.