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EU one step closer to better flood management

Brussels, May 4 2006 - The Environmental Committee of the European Parliament today adopted its Report on the proposal for a directive on the assessment and management of floods [COM (2006) 15]. The European Environmental Bureau and WWF welcome the decision of the Environment Committee to add a clear environmental objective and give priority to measures that work with nature in managing flood risks and a request for implementing the principle that users have to pay for structural flood management measures. We believe that this Directive should be used as an opportunity for concerted European action on flood risk management that acknowledges flood mitigation services provided by healthy-functioning aquatic ecosystems and gives preference to non-structural measures where possible. This would protect people, property and the environment and help achieve environmentally sustainable water and land use planning.

Stefan Scheuer, EEB's EU Policy Director, said: "We welcome the fact that Parliament is moving the Directive towards "efficient legislation" that ensures that flood risk management measures support the achievement of the objectives of the Water Framework Directive and deploys economic instruments to make business pay for the costs of flood control services. What is still missing though is provisions for integration of the planning processes required under the two directives. We believe this is the most cost-effective and sustainable way to develop any flood risk management measures and will reduce bureaucracy and help save valuable resources by avoiding 2 parallel planning and reporting processes"

Since 1998 floods in Europe have caused some 700 deaths, the displacement of about half a million people and at least €25 billion in insured economic losses.

Floods are a natural phenomenon that cannot be avoided, but their frequency and intensity is growing due to global warming and bad land use planning and mismanagement along the entire length of our rivers and coasts. The long-term practice of forcing water into a narrow corset and expediting its run-off has failed. In order to provide natural flood protection and restore the health of the rivers, they need room.

Sergey Moroz from the WWF European Policy Office added "We are pleased to see that EU citizens representatives give priority to measures that work with nature and recognise that the traditional paradigm of flood management - "building to protect" - has not delivered the safety it was supposed to. The land and water environment have a "natural" role to play in flood risk management via, for example, water retention by floodplains and wetlands. These can act as sponges, absorbing and retaining floodwaters to slowly release them afterwards - a natural capacity urgently needed in adapting to climate change impacts. The provisions of the directive, however, need further strengthening to ensure these areas and the functions they perform are included in flood risk maps and management plans".

The European Parliament is scheduled to have its vote in June. It is now in the hands of the full assembly to support the Environment Committee opinion and strengthen the selected provision of the directive to make it a "better regulation".

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