

(English version)

**Priority question for written answer P-001360/24
to the Commission
Giuseppe Antoci (The Left)
(16 July 2024)**

Subject: Water crisis in Sicily — assessment and request for urgent action

Sicily is facing one of the worst water crises in its history, with very low rainfall having drastically reduced its water reserves ⁽¹⁾. On top of this, the lakes and watercourses it traditionally relies upon are drying up at an alarming rate, putting at risk not just farming, but also entire ecosystems ⁽²⁾. Safety standards applicable to dams dictate that reservoirs cannot be filled to their maximum capacity ⁽³⁾. A host of orders have been issued at local level banning the use of water from the water supply system and forcing the public to buy bottled water, which is subject to VAT at the standard rate.

The regional government has appointed a Commissioner for Drought. The proposed solutions include the reactivation of desalination plant and the use of new wells, but this is being hampered by a lack of funds and ineffectual planning. The regional government has requested a derogation from certain Common Agricultural Policy ⁽⁴⁾ requirements, given the need for around EUR 5 billion which will not be covered by the funding available.

In view of this, can the Commission answer the following questions:

1. What financial measures could it take to support Sicily in managing this water emergency?
2. Has the Italian Government requested that the EU Solidarity Fund be triggered for the water emergency in Sicily, and what sum has it applied for?
3. How does the Commission assess the possibility, given the emergency, of applying a reduced rate of VAT to bottled water, pursuant to Directive 2006/112/EC?

Submitted: 16.7.2024

**Answer given by Ms Ferreira on behalf of the European Commission
(27 August 2024)**

1. Under cohesion policy, European Regional Development Fund Operational Programme SICILIA 2021-2027 has a budget of EUR 36 million for the action 'Increasing infrastructure, with priority to civil distribution, sewerage and purification networks'. The Italian Resilience and Recovery Plan ⁽¹⁾ includes support for sustainable water management, with the Member State responsible for the allocation of Recovery and Resilience Facility support across regions. The common agricultural policy supports the use of risk management tools in case of adverse weather conditions, preventive actions and restoration of agricultural potential damaged by natural disasters. The LIFE programme can support innovative solutions for desalination.

Financial support from EU funds can be given to investments aimed at ensuring sufficient water supply if they meet the eligibility criteria and the requirements of the water and environmental acquis ⁽²⁾. Investment Projects need to be in line with the requirements of the programme in place; for some funds shared management principles apply.

¹ http://www.sias.regione.sicilia.it/frameset_news_97.htm.

² <https://www.valigiablu.it/siccita-sicilia-crisi-climatica/>.

³ <https://focusicilia.it/dighe-interrimento-sicilia/>.

⁴ <https://www.siciliaagricoltura.it/2024/06/23/siccita-la-regione-chiede-il-riconoscimento-di-circostanze-eccezionali-a-ministero-della-sovranita-agricola-e-ue/>.

⁽¹⁾ See revised Annex to the Council Implementing Decision amending Implementing Decision of 13 July 2021 on the approval of the assessment of the recovery and resilience plan for Italy. Sustainable water management measures regard Investments 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 of Mission 2, Component 4. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a0e7539e-8d32-11ee-8aa6-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

⁽²⁾ The Commission Directorate-General for the Environment published in 2022 a guide providing a detailed description of those 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF) and NextGenerationEU funding programmes and instruments that could support projects that directly or indirectly contribute to the EU's environmental policies and objectives <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/33b54f0d-0251-11ed-acce-01aa75ed71a1>

2. As of 6 August 2024, Italy has not activated the EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF) ⁽³⁾ to address the situation in Sicily. If Italy decides to apply, it must do so within 12 weeks from the occurrence of the first damage, demonstrating that the total direct damage exceeds the thresholds specified in Article 2 of Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002. The EUSF may cover part of the costs for emergency and recovery operations ⁽⁴⁾.

3. The Value Added Tax (VAT) Directive ⁽⁵⁾ does not preclude the application of reduced VAT rates to the supply of water, including bottled water ⁽⁶⁾. The decision to take up this option is at the discretion of Member States which may also decide to apply reduced rates or exemptions ⁽⁷⁾.

⁽³⁾ Council Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 of 11 November 2002 establishing the European Union Solidarity Fund (OJ L 311, 14.11.2002, p. 3) as amended by Regulation (EU) No 661/2014 of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 May 2014 (OJ L 189, 27.6.2014, p. 143) and by Regulation (EU) 2020/461 of the European Parliament and the Council of 30 March 2020 (OJ L 99, 31.3.2020, p. 9). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32002R2012>

⁽⁴⁾ Private damage is not eligible.

⁽⁵⁾ Council Directive 2006/112/EC of 28 November 2006 on the common system of value added tax (OJ L 347, 11.12.2006, p. 1), as amended.

⁽⁶⁾ Article 98(1) and Annex III, Category c.

⁽⁷⁾ Council Directive (EU) 2022/542 of 5 April 2022 amending Directives 2006/112/EC and (EU) 2020/285 as regards rates of value added tax, OJ L 107, 6.4.2022, p. 1.