

EU probes mismanagement in prized Spanish wetland

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A boat is seen in a wetland gone dry in Las Tablas de Daimiel National Park, in Castilla-La Mancha, Spain, on Tuesday, Oct. 13, 2009. The European Union has launched an investigation into a prized Spanish wetland that has turned bone dry through mismanagement of water resources and is now on fire underground. (AP Photo/Arturo Rodriguez)

(AP) -- The European Union has launched an investigation into a prized Spanish wetland that has turned bone dry through mismanagement of water resources and is now on fire underground, white smoke now rising from areas where fish once swam.

The EU wants the Spanish government to explain how it plans to save Las Tablas de Daimiel National Park in the central Castilla-La Mancha region, European Commission spokeswoman Barbara Helfferich told The Associated Press on Thursday.

The park, one of Spain's few wetlands, is classified as a UNESCO [biosphere](#) site and an EU-protected area because of its birdlife.

But it has been drying up for decades, largely because of wells dug by farmers on the edges of the park to tap an aquifer that feeds the wetland's lagoons. Many of the wells are illegal. Environmentalists call this case a particularly glaring example of how a natural resource can be abused.

In August, intense summer heat and parched soil caused the peat just under the surface of the soil to spontaneously ignite. Now, several areas of the park are on fire underground and white smoke seeps out of deep cracks in the parched soil.

"We have seen a situation where there is continuous degradation of territory," Helfferich said from Brussels.

The EU told the Spanish government about its investigation last week and Spain has 10 weeks to explain how it plans to respond to the crisis, Helfferich said.

"Underground fires at the moment cannot be extinguished," she said, adding that the 27-nation bloc has asked Spain how it plans to deal with it.

In a worst-case scenario, the EU could punish Spain with a hefty fine if it deems that the government's management of the wetlands was insufficient.

Josep Puxeu, the Environment Ministry's top official on [water](#) issues, said the government has an emergency plan to pump in torrents of water from a river to put out the fires and restore the aquifer.

It will also continue with a policy of buying up land and farms outside the park to halt water being drawn from wells, he told reporters.

The park lies 90 miles (150 kilometers) south of Madrid. Not all of it is wetland. The area capable of holding water covers about 4,500 acres (1,800 hectares) but less than 1 percent of that actually has water.

Park ranger Jesus Garcia Consuegra, who grew up in the area, remembers lush times. He would go fishing there as a boy, venturing out at night in a rowboat equipped with a lantern to draw fish to the surface.

"It was so clear you could see to the bottom. You could see the fish there. You could watch them and it was simply marvelous," he said in a documentary on the park's Web site.

Jose Manuel Hernandez, spokesman for the environmental group Ecologists in Action, placed the blame for the wetland's demise squarely on excessive use of underground water tables for irrigation. He said climate change has nothing to do with the problem because La Mancha is dry anyway and rain levels have not dropped that much.

Rather, the culprit is a government policy over the past 20 years that allowed farmers to shift from non-irrigated crops like olive groves and wheat to thirsty ones like grapes and melons, he told the AP.

The Guadiana River, for instance, which once flowed through La Mancha, has essentially vanished for this reason and peat fires like the ones in Las Tablas de Daimiel have been common in that riverbed for years.

"The Guadiana has been burning for 20 years," Hernandez said. "People are just waking up now because the fires have cropped up in a national

park."

He called the idea of bringing in huge amounts of water to put out the fires and restore the aquifer a pointless stopgap measure: the land is so dry and the water table now so low that water brought in from outside will simply get sucked up by the soil and not reach the aquifer.

It is artificial to try to save a wetland this way, and better to manage the existing water more efficiently by cutting down on use of wells, Hernandez said.

"What we need to do is recover the dynamics of the ecosystem."

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