

Strasbourg, 23 October 2013
[files07e_2013.doc]

T-PVS/Files (2013) 7

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

33rd meeting
Strasbourg, 3-6 December 2013

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**Eradication and trade of
the American Grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)
in Italy**

REPORT BY THE GOVERNMENT

*Document prepared by:
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ERADICATION AND TRADE OF THE AMERICAN GREY SQUIRREL (*SCIURUS CAROLINENSIS*) IN ITALY - GOVERNMENTAL REPORT ON CASE FILE

Following the 28th Standing Committee of the Bern Convention, a case-file was opened on Italy regarding the “implementation of Recommendation n° 123 (2007) on limiting the dispersal of the Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) in Italy and other Contracting Parties”.

The Recommendation n. 123 (2007) asked Italy to:

1. *urge the Lombardia Region and the other competent local authorities to start without further delay the eradication program of the Grey Squirrel in the Ticino Valley, so as to significantly delay invasion of Southern Alps;*

Furtherly, the Recommendation asked the Contracting Party to:

2. *ban trade and possession of the Grey Squirrel;*
3. *eradicate new possible introduced populations of Grey Squirrels.*

This paper reports the state of the play of the issue, in order to give the 33rd Standing Committee the broader information needed to discuss the case-file.

Background

In response to the Recommendation 123(2007) Italian Ministry of the Environment, Land and Sea started a series of activities aimed to achieve the requested objectives, consisting of:

- a memorandum of understanding involving Lombardy, Piedmont and Liguria Regions, Universities and ISPRA (Italian high Institute for protection and research of the environment), to agree on necessary interventions in the field and to share consequent responsibilities and burdens. The MoU was signed in 2009.
- An action in the context of EU CITES Committee to promote community measures limiting trade of Grey squirrel.
- The preparation of a ministerial Decree to ban trade a possession in Italy of specimens of Grey squirrel.

Of all the carried out activities, the Standing Committee has been periodically and punctually kept informed.

Keeping and trade at EU level

Thanks to Italian initiative, after long negotiations, the Grey Squirrel (and other two species of squirrels) eventually was included in the Annex B of the EU Council Regulation No. 338/97 under article 3.2.d, listing the species because of its invasivity. According to Regulation 338/97 new Annexes and Suspension Regulation, it is now forbidden to import live specimens of the three squirrel species (besides *Sciurus carolinensis*, also *Callosciurus erytherus* and *Sciurus niger*) in the EU, even though there are no restrictions to their movement within the boundaries of EU.

Furthermore, in 2012 the Ministry of the Environment, formally requested the Commission to start up the procedures to implement Art. 9.6 of Council Regulation (EC) No. 338/97 aiming to establish restrictions on the holding or movement of live specimens of the three species added in Annex B, and to discuss it as soon as possible¹. In fact, according with the Council Regulation No. 338/97 under article 9.6: “The Commission can establish restrictions to possession and movement of specimens of species for which restriction to introduction in EU are adopted.”

Unfortunately the Italian request, lacking adequate support by the other EU Member States attending the UE CITES Committee, was denied by the European Commission in October 2012.

¹ According to the Council Regulation No. 338/97 under article 9.6: “The Commission can establish restrictions to possession and movement of specimens of species for which restriction to introduction in EU are adopted.”

The inclusion of the alien species in the Annex B of the EU CITES Regulation represented an important and crucial step because it juridically facilitated the adoption of national provisions.

National ban of Grey squirrel's trading and possession

After a long and difficult preparatory work – involving several administrations – the ban Decree “Dispositions for the control of detention and trade of alien squirrels of the species *Callosciurus erythraeus*, *Sciurus carolinensis* and *Sciurus niger*” was issued on December 24th 2012 by the Minister of the Environment Land and Sea, in agreement with the Minister of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies and with the Minister of Economic Development; the Decree was published on 2nd February 2013 in Official Journal n° 28.

With the Decree it is now forbidden to trade, to breed and to detain, in the whole national territory, specimens of three squirrel species (besides *Sciurus carolinensis*, also *Callosciurus erythraeus* and *Sciurus niger*), defined as “alien squirrels”.

In short, these are the contents of the Decree:

- Prohibition of trading, breeding and detaining specimens of the three squirrel species in all the national territory
- Obligation of notifying within 90 days the possession for any purpose of specimen to State Forestry Corp;
- Obligation of notifying within 30 days the birth or the purchase of new specimens;
- Obligation of adopting every preventive measure to avoid accidental introduction of specimens in the natural environment and their reproduction;
- A temporary disposition that delay for six months the ban of trading and import the three species;
- Penalties for illegal detention, trade or abandonment of specimens;
- Exemptions from the ban decree disposals for zoos, research bodies, institutes or centres, wildlife conservation bodies, scientific bodies, circuses.

Regarding the implementation of the Decree, even though the short time elapsed after the actual entry in force of the ban, there are already some information giving signals that it is working properly (some shops would have stopped the selling of Grey squirrel also before the entry in force of the ban and a pair of animals has been spontaneously brought to local authorities). In the next months probably it will be possible to have a detailed report of the results achieved by the new rules.

Control and eradication of Grey squirrel on the ground

Giving implementation to the above mentioned MoU signed in 2009 among central and regional administrations, in 2009 a project (EC-SQUARE) finalized to control and eradicate the population of Grey squirrel in Ticino valley and other territories was presented, successfully awarded and financed under LIFE Programme².

The project was submitted by Lombardy Region, in partnership with Regions Piedmont and Liguria and some universities and research centers and co-financed by Italian Ministry of the Environment.

Project activities started in September 2010. Its task force, consisting of a scientific unit and a public relations unit, includes representatives of three involved Regions, ISPRA (National High Institute for Environmental Protection and Research), Universities and the Research Institute Oikos.

The main objective of EC-SQUARE is to eliminate or, where eradication will be judged impracticable, to control the risks posed by the introduced alien species, the eastern Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) to biodiversity, and in particular to the conservation of the native Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*). A major challenge for a successful eradication and/or control campaign is to obtain

² LIFE09/NAT/IT/095 EC-SQUARE “Eradication and control of Grey Squirrel: actions for preservation of biodiversity in forest ecosystems”

a wide consensus of civil society to justify control measures, suitable in different socio-ecological situations.

However, monitoring activities during the project produced a fact report for the species that is much worse than what was known prior to project starting; this led to a change in the project objectives and priorities.

In Lombardy there are now 36 nuclei in respect to the 10 known in 2009. The eradication is still considered possible, but only for part of them within the timeframe of the LIFE project. Trapping activities are ongoing in four of the eight identified macro-areas. Within the LIFE project it is aimed to eradicate alien squirrels from one macro-area and drastically reduce the populations in other two areas.

Activities are now being organized with local authorities that could continue after the end of the LIFE ("after LIFE plan"). However it should be emphasized that animal right groups are pressing many local authorities (provinces, parks and local municipalities) in charge of this plan in order to obtain their disengagement.

In Piedmont a control plan was considered the only solution according to the distribution of the largest Italian Grey Squirrel population. However, the present range of the species is over 2,000 km², a large increase compared to the 900 km² covered in the year 2000 (the value used as reference preparing the LIFE project). According to the present situation, the control of the Grey Squirrel will be conducted in some experimental areas with the aim to preserve viable Red Squirrel populations and check the possibility to stop the spread of the alien species. At the end of the project, a Grey Squirrel control plan will be developed to continue the activity in subsequent years.

The start of the control activities in Piedmont were delayed because the original regional decree was appealed in front of the Regional Administrative Court of law and of the State Council. After several "back and forth" among courts and institutions, the appeals from animalist associations were eventually rejected and Regional authorization is now in force.

Interventions that involve killing of animals considered 'attractive' as squirrels, are typically difficult to explain and to be accepted by some segments of the society that give greater importance to the well-being of individuals, missing the overall interest in biodiversity conservation. The appeals to the administrative Courts, petitions to Italian and European Parliament, public demonstrations, negative campaigns through mass media, are all actions aimed at stopping or delaying trapping activities. The preservation of the Grey Squirrel has become the 'flag campaign' of some animal rights associations. The management of the alien squirrels gained the attention of many mass media that often reported the project in a negative way. Whereas showing scientific evidence of danger posed by IAS to native species hardly can have space in mass media, it is very easy to have consensus emphasizing the 'cruelty' of killing 'cute and harmless' squirrels.

Eradication is normally carried out by live-trapping and subsequent euthanasia of trapped animals. However, this solution is not accepted by part of the society. In Liguria the only Grey Squirrel population known is located in the Genoa Nervi public park and in nearby private gardens. The Nervi population, since its settlement, represents a strong attraction for the park visitors, accustomed to see and feed the Grey Squirrels inside an urban area. For this reason in Genoa Nervi we considered the eradication with surgical sterilisation as a possible alternative. However, despite continuing meetings with associations and citizens and a willingness to change the management plan, providing for the release of sterilized squirrels in other parks of Genoa instead of maintaining them in captivity, a small group of citizens is still opposing the project.

A further delay was due to the difficulty to find a veterinary clinic in charge of the sterilizations, also because of the pressure exerted on some clinics by the opponents to the project that convinced them to desist. Despite these difficulties, the project is going-on and the trapping activity is expected to start within this year.

Overall, the project objectives currently are to:

- 1) eradicate the Grey Squirrel from Genoa and from at least one macro-area in Lombardy;
- 2) drastically reduce the populations in another two macro-areas in Lombardy and start activities that could continue after the LIFE project to achieve their eradication;

- 3) provide details on how to start in the medium term the removal activities in other macro-areas of Lombardy;
- 4) start control activities in two areas in Piedmont, with the aim to preserve viable Red Squirrel populations and check the possibility to stop the spread of the alien species;
- 5) provide details on how to start a long-term control plan in this region.

Conclusions

Important results have been achieved in response to the requests made by the Standing Committee about the issue: prohibition of detaining and trading Grey Squirrels is now in force in Italy and, in spite of big obstacles posed by an unfavourable public opinion, a sound project to control and eradicate the Grey Squirrel is being carried out in the north-western part of the country in the framework of a broad involvement of all the institutions concerned (state, regional, local, research).

These results testify the efforts made by Italy in order to fulfil the international commitments taken and should be properly considered in the evaluation the Standing Committee will do about the case-file.

21st October 2013