

ENGAGING - Engaging owners of small private forests in active management

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The increase in small forest properties that are managed by non-forestry experts is a pan-European phenomenon. The size of these small-holder forests varies in a wide range, yet a common characteristic is that the forests are generating an insignificant part of the income of the forest owner. The forests are therefore receiving attention by their owners to widely varying degrees. The origin of small forest properties is often based in agriculture. Farms needed forest resources as construction material and as source for bioenergy, and much earlier forests even provided nutrients via litter raking and pollarding. Societal changes all over Europe caused a diversification of career plans. Many persons sought an education outside of agricultural family traditions and made careers outside of the agricultural sector. Agriculture itself required a smaller work force due to technological progress and increases in management efficiencies. Whereas agricultural land was either sold or leased, the management of forests that have belonged to the farms stayed as family property and is still owned or managed by persons who are no longer engaged in the primary sector.

Forest management can be quite extensive. Small forests require periodic attention but need not necessarily continuous management. Yet, irrespective of the property size forest work requires a technical infrastructure, knowledge on the biology of trees, and technical skills including knowledge on work safety. The understanding of local timber marketing traditions is an asset, and forest owners need to respect the Forest Acts of the respective countries. For traditional rural communities an efficient communication system is established, where individual forest owners are aware of market opportunities, intentions of the forest policy, and the obligations of forest owners with respect to forest management. However, when forest owners are adopting urban lifestyles and are no longer part of the local communities in rural areas, the traditional communication channel is broken. New ways are sought to re-establish a dialogue between forest policy, forest administration and owners of small forests.

Small-holder foresters can have different goals when managing their forests. Not all of them are consistent with efficient forestry, yet many goals are valid. Challenges arise when forests are ill managed. Eventual outbreaks of bark beetle or other pests on small forests have immediate negative impacts on the forests of neighbours. The need for more intense forest management appears instantaneously and may be a considerable challenge for forest owners. Quickly emerging challenges such as consequences of climate change amplify the challenges.

In our project we investigated communication channels between stakeholders in forestry and owners of small forests. We analysed the strengths and shortcomings of existing media and made suggestions for efficient campaigning.