

This series of informative fiches aim to present, in summary, examples of practices and approaches that EU Member States and Regions have put in place in order to implement their Rural Development Programmes in the current period. These examples want to contribute to the understanding of what has worked well and less well in the delivery of the 2007-2013 RDPs and as far as possible, draw lessons in the view of future improvement of the programmes.

Creating a productive mixed forest on abandoned agricultural land, Latvia



BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

Skogssallskapet Ltd (owned by Skogssallskapet Holding, Ltd) is one of the largest private land management companies in Latvia. Its strategic aim is to produce high-quality wood following the Code of Sustainable Forest Management - established by the International Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) - and combining economic, social and environmental interests. The company implements plans promoting sustainable forest management in various parts of the country. It was also planning to create a productive mixed forest on 50 ha of abandoned agricultural land, propriety of Zilupe Forests Ltd (a com-

pany owned by Skogssallskapet Holding Ltd as well), that has not been used in any economic activity since some time. The main objective of the project was to increase the economic value of the abandoned land by restoring its economic function and creating a productive mixed forest stand of silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) trees.

Restoring the ecological function of the land was another objective. Namely the new timber resource is expected to reduce the future commercial pressures on naturally established forests with high conservation value which are

present in the region. Also in the long run, young forest stands that make up the ecosystem transition from grassland to older forests and swamps will carry on their ecological function.

Overall, the project was in line with the owner's long term investment strategy for forestry production.



Keywords: Environment and sustainable resource management. Sustainable use of forestry land

EU Member State: Latvia

Specific Location: Zaļesje Parish, Zilupe District

Main beneficiary: Skogssallskapet, Ltd.

www.skogssallskapet.lv

RDP Measure: Measure 223: First afforestation of non agricultural land

Funds Allocated: Total cost: EUR 79 781

EAFRD: EUR 70 361

Private contribution: EUR 9 420

Implementation Period: 28/12/2009 – 15/11/2011

Current practices across the EU27



DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

Based on the solid experience of the company, as a first step the project beneficiary prepared a feasibility study in order to respond better to the land owner's needs and plan the relevant investments. The feasibility study included the following activities:

- ◆ precise identification of the areas that were not used in agricultural activities for a long time;
- ◆ on-the-spot studies of conditions of the soil in order to determine the most appropriate tree species;
- ◆ analysis of planting stock and the most suitable mixture for the particular conditions of the soil.

Once these preliminary activities completed a comprehensive project plan was developed to ensure the successful implementation of the project. The project plan articulated three main set of activities:

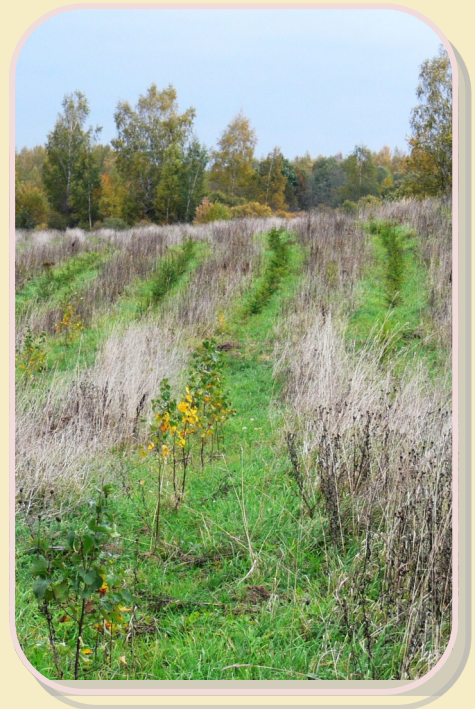
- ◆ Elaboration of the forest management plan
- ◆ Creation of the forest stand according to the management plan
- ◆ Maintenance of planted forest stand according to the management plan

The elaboration of the forest management plan, as a crucial element of project implementation, is a prerequisite for submitting the application

for EAFRD support. It details planning of tasks (including for example: inspection activities of the area, marking and measuring with GPS, and precise planning of the forest management activities) timetables, human and financial resources. Once preliminary approved by the State Forestry Service it was submitted to the Paying Agency by Skogssallskapet Ltd together with the project application.

Thanks to the company's long experience with similar kind of projects and the existence of an internal system of quality control in the organization, risks related to the implementation of the activities were minimized except, of course, those related to unpredictable external causes such as adverse weather conditions like storms, black frosts, etc.

A project team lead by a project coordinator was established for the effective quality control throughout the project's implementation. The team included a project coordinator responsible for planning, reporting and monitoring activities and a project assistant assigned to manage coordination of the activities on-the-spot, supervision of service providers, on-going monitoring of the implementation of the project and reporting to project coordinator. In parallel, the system of quality checks performed by the State Forestry Service and the Rural Support Service (Paying Agency) ensured that implementation of the project was managed according to the plan.



IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

According to the project plan, the implementation phase consisted of two sets of activities:

1. Creation of the forest stand according to the management plan including: cutting the overgrown bushes that had colonized the land since it was last farmed; preparing the soil by tractor for planting trees. The trees planting process is manual and it foresees planting of 2,5 thousand pieces per hectare. All together 121 thousand young trees were planted. As the objective was to create a productive mixed forest, 27 thousand plants of silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and 94 thousand pieces of Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) were planted. The plants were selected and suitable for local conditions.

Current practices across the EU27

- Maintenance of planted forest stand according to the management plan. The maintenance activities after planting were organized regularly. It included cutting the grass (for some areas twice in a season) to prevent it growing over the young trees and weakening or even killing them. On-going monitoring of the area was organised as well, especially in spring, when there is high risk of burning old grass due to irresponsible inhabitants' behaviours.

Overall, no significant modifications were made to the initial project plan. Some re-planning of the trees allocation was done after clearing the overgrown vegetation when it was easier to identify which areas and soils were the most suitable for the two different species of trees.



RESULTS OF THE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

All the expected outcomes were achieved in accordance to the project plan.

The productive use of the abandoned land was restored and it is expected that it will provide economic benefits in the future in line with long-term management strategy of the forest owner. The ecological outcomes, on the other hand, cannot be measured yet. However it is already visible that young forest stands already carry on their ecological function by helping to make up the transition from grassland to more mature ecosystems.

One of the project outcomes - not originally planned - is the creation of temporary work places in the region. People from the region are employed for some temporary works and their number varies according to the season and amount of work in the field. The importance of this achievement is stressed by the fact that the project was implemented in the area that is one of poorest in the EU and the implementation took place during time of economic crisis.



LESSONS LEARNT

A numbers of factors contributed to success of the project, particularly:

- ◆ The existing solid experience of the company on similar kind of activities is the most significant factor. Skogssallskapet Ltd has developed an **internal quality control system** that allows reducing possible failures of project implementation as well as making the implementation even more effective.
- ◆ The involvement of the owner (Zilupe Forests, Ltd) during the elaboration of the project by providing relevant information and also through participation in monitoring visits benefited the seamless implementation of the forest management plan.
- ◆ Effective communication and long-term cooperation with business partners/service providers that were involved in the project helped to deal with issues proactively. For example, the needs of machinery to be used varied during project implementation and Skogssallskapet Ltd was renting the necessary equipment from a local company which could flexibly respond to this particular kind of needs.



The accurate planning and quality procedures established allowed the project to run without major impediments. Some delays were recorded during implementation as structural changes in the State Forestry Service and other related state institutions impacted on timely communication and exchange with the public administration. However Skogssallskapet, Ltd had already good cooperation history with mentioned institutions, which helped to proactively reply to these circumstances and avoid notable variations in the implementation of the project.

Current practices across the EU27

The expectations of the beneficiaries have been satisfied by the project. The local municipality is also satisfied with the projects as it contributed to generate work places, add value to the natural resources and to the sustainable development of the area.



WHAT'S NEXT?

The results of the project are notable as the management of the forest still continues with a regular maintenance of the planted forest stand and continuous monitoring of the area. According to needs, the forest stand is supplemented by new plants.

The financial sustainability of the project cannot be measured yet because planting the forest is considered a long term investment that will pay back after several decades. However, wise management of the forest and in particular transforming abandoned land into productive forest increases the value of the land and for this reason makes this project financially sustainable from long-term perspective.



SUMMARY

EAFRD support for creation of productive mixed forest on abandoned agricultural land of 50 ha helped to establish new forest ecosystem that is bringing economic, social and environmental benefits to a remote rural area.

Tips/lessons related to the beneficiary:

- ◆ The combination of clear long-term strategy and organizational experience helps to plan long-term investments wisely and selecting the most suitable resources for the implementation of the project.
- ◆ Fine assessment of the abandoned agricultural land as well as its potential for any other economic activity is needed on-the-spot. Sometimes such areas are very small parcels in-between forests and also relief is not suitable for effective agricultural activity, so afforestation of the area can be considered the most relevant activity.
- ◆ Internal quality control system in combination with experienced project management helps to use resources effectively and deal with external threats proactively during the implementation of the project.



Tips/lessons related to Managing Authorities and other public sector actors:

- ◆ Afforestation of abandoned agricultural land can bring long-term economic and environmental benefits to depopulated areas.
- ◆ Implementation of sustainable forest management plans gives also extra jobs to the areas especially in the first years of maintenance activities. It can be considered as strategic activity for areas in economic and social recession.
- ◆ Transfer of knowledge and also experience of sustainable forest management is needed to small scale forest owners as well as farmers who want to diversify or develop economic activity in remote rural areas.