

GERMANY

Biodiversity's restoration, preservation & enhancement

Location

southern Brandenburg

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P4 – Ecosystems
management

Measure

M08 - Investments in forest
areas

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 37 500
RDP contribution 30 000
Private 7 500

Project duration

2020 – 2021

Project promoter

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A project that combines research, environmental education and forestry practice and is aimed at small and medium-sized private forest owners who are severely affected by climate change.

Summary

The project is aimed at small and medium-sized private forest owners in southern Brandenburg, Germany, who are severely affected by climate change. These owners are not completely dependent on timber revenues, in contrast to large forestry operations and thus not as proactive.



Although lacking basic knowledge owners are willing to invest in measures to protect the forest from climate change, due to their emotional ties. In response to this, a regional action platform focusing on forest protection and forest renewal was created. The overarching goal is to engage still sceptical forest owners with forest renewal and conservation measures, and in particular to promote personal initiative. At the same time, a 'pro-forest' awareness is created. This high-profile project combines research, environmental education and forestry practice, engaging disparate actors into a dialogue.

Results

About 90 % of the forest owners surveyed see themselves confronted with serious forest damage.

Forest owners are now more aware of and concerned about the health of their forests.

Many forest owners are pragmatic. They are becoming increasingly active advocates and are well placed to motivate their previously inactive peers.

Above all, there is a demand for promotion of measures to support ecological forest conversion and to work to reduce damaged wood

Lessons & Recommendations

- Emotions, personal involvement and one's own participation in decisions can facilitate access to controversial forest issues, even if it is (only) a matter of 'making one's voice heard'. This is why such direct online surveys are particularly valuable - provided that the results are published promptly and taken seriously by decision-makers.
- Those who get involved voluntarily and altruistically should also know that it is worthwhile and that they themselves derive added value from it.
- It is crucial that the results lead to tangible action.
- The aim of such projects is to create suitable advisory services for small and medium-sized private forest owners and to accompany them scientifically, in a way that relates to their regional context and the specific conditions.
- It is possible to combine the advantages of digital offers and face-to-face events.

Context

The Elbe-Elster region is one of the most climate-sensitive landscapes in Central Europe. In dry years, such as 2003, 2006, 2018 or 2019 the annual precipitation barely reached 400 millimetres. Anyone travelling in southern Brandenburg can see it: the familiar landscape is changing, the 'patient forest' is doing badly. The extreme weather leaves its mark and is an alarm signal. Here, especially the Scots pine suffers from a lack of water and heat; bark beetles and needle-eating insect pests have an easy time of it in the pre-weakened forest stands. In the Elbe-Elster district, for example, several hundred hectares of pine trees have died since 2018. Around 15 000 hectares are acutely damaged - the equivalent of 20 000 standard football pitches. The forest protection situation is threatening to get out of control, yet the year 2020 has only revealed the full extent of the damage. At present, the Elbe-Elster district is experiencing forest damage on a hitherto unknown scale in many places. The pine stands are most affected, and they make up about three quarters of the stocking.

Bark beetles and other insect pests have emerged stronger from the two 'summers of the century' in 2018 and 2019. The forest protection situation is extremely tense as currently, around 15 000 hectares in the Elbe-Elster region have an acute pest infestation, around 3 300 forest owners are affected, and entire stands are dying.

At present, it is hard to estimate the economic and ecological impacts. This is a completely new situation for all forest owners and nervousness is spreading. In the unique transformation process, many lack silvicultural knowledge. At the same time, the general forest policy debate is coming to a head, especially with regard to financial support for forest owners in terms of concrete support measures. The crucial question is how best to respond to this, and thus small and medium-sized private forests are moving into the public eye.

Objectives

The main objectives of this project include:

- Activation of those forest owners who are still hesitating to get involved in forest renewal in the Elbe-Elster region. The area has an estimated 4 800 forest owners, who own a total of 53 000 hectares of private and communal forest. However only 881 forest owners are currently organised in 15 forest management associations.
- Motivation for necessary, but often costly forest protection measures, as well as proactive forest conversion and young stand maintenance.

- Guidance for 'help for self-help', especially for measures that can be done without great financial expense e.g. managing in line with nature.
- 'We pull together' - complement the advisory campaign of the Brandenburg State Forestry Office and the offers of private service providers.

Activities

The starting point, pivot and pivotal point is the online-supported 'Elbe-Elster Forest Survey 2020'. It enables forest owners to form an opinion and at the same time contributes to raising awareness of this socially important issue, with all interested forest owners able to participate. In this way, they make themselves 'heard', have their say and willingly share experiences, insights and opinions with others: *"How do you manage your own forest? - How do you set a good example? - How do you rate existing support and advisory services? - Do the promotion goals coincide with my interests? - What hurdles exist and how can they be removed? - What expectations do I have of state guidance services, what can be improved?"*.

The Forschungsinstitut für Bergbaufolgelandschaften e.V. (FIB) presented the scientifically prepared results to the 'stressed' forest owners at three regional 'Forest Conferences Elbe-Elster - Climate Impacts and Adaptation' which included discussion sessions. They all represent various legitimate points of view, which should also be expressed. The meetings are arranged locally in particularly affected communities of the district, and the familiar environment gives confidence to even rather reserved people speak.

Main results

- **Online surveys** that reach forest owners: anonymous, easy to respond to surveys with data protection provision guaranteed.
- **Communication** of the topic 'climate and forest change' in the private forest Elbe-Elster: about 90 % of the forest owners surveyed see themselves confronted with serious forest damage.
- **Awareness** of the problem has been created: Forest owners are now more concerned, sensitive and worried about the health of their forests.
- The **next step** is to renew forest substance: many owners are pragmatic and are becoming increasingly active and they also get involved in recruiting the support of previously inactive people.

- Above all, there is a demand for promotion of measures to support ecological forest conversion and to work to reduce damaged wood. Sessile and pedunculate oak as well as common birch are favoured by most respondents as tree species of the future (mixed forests as a perspective).
- Corresponds to the natural and expected future distribution of tree species and corresponds to the general silvicultural recommendations for southern Brandenburg.
- More information for many private forest owners and coordination of the desire for stronger support from the state of Brandenburg and EU funding programmes.

Key lessons

What has been learned from the current debate on the future of forests in Elbe-Elster is that emotions, personal involvement and personal participation in decisions can facilitate access to controversial forest issues, even if it is (only) a matter of 'making one's voice heard'. This is why such direct online surveys are particularly valuable - provided that the results are published promptly and taken seriously by decision-makers.

Those who get involved voluntarily and altruistically in such projects should also know that it is worthwhile and that they themselves derive added value from it. This generates their own willingness to act and motivates other forest owners.

It is crucial that the results lead to tangible action, the forest survey is not an end in itself, it only serves to

increase academic knowledge. Such activities, based on citizen participation, must be consolidated and followed up with, for example, further information and connected discussion events.

The aim of such projects is to create suitable advisory services for small and medium-sized private forest owners and to accompany them scientifically, in a way that relates to their regional context and the specific conditions.

This can be done by combining the advantages of digital offers and face-to-face events. Possible formats and topics include 'Forest research meets private forest' using practical exercises/excursions ('Private Forest Workshop') or a regular 'Elbe-Elster Forest Forum' etc.

Many forest owners are online. The project 'Climate-stable Forests Elbe-Elster' is attracting state-wide interest, for example from other Local Action Groups (LAG) as supporting pillars of rural development in the 14 LEADER regions. For the first time, a database of small and medium-sized private forests who are motivated and willing to act is now available for Brandenburg.

The next step could be a digital forest survey weighted according to 'social milieus' for the whole of Brandenburg. This provides the opportunity for forest policy goals in the state to be achieved better using instruments designed for different target groups and/or regional characteristics. The existing network of LAG regions can be used for a comprehensive and equally differentiated large 'forest survey' according to social milieus. Through their regional presence and networking with stakeholders, a high degree of mobilisation might be expected, similar to Elbe-Elster.

Additional sources of information

n/a