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Welsh forestry 'first' leads the way on making the most of woodlands across Europe

A ground-breaking 'first' project for Wales is playing a lead role in showing how best forestry practices can help provide jobs and new income across rural Europe.

Forestry Commission Wales is helping point the way to a sustainable future through trees and timber across Italy, Germany, Spain, Poland Slovakia and Wales in the £4 million Robinwood project announced in Brussels today.

The task for FC Wales, which manages the Welsh Assembly forest, is to bring together woodland management skills and knowledge to help make the most of woodlands in preventing natural disasters, as well as providing new income and business opportunities and protecting the environment.

It is the first time Wales has been a partner in one of the European Interreg 111c RFO (Regional Framework Operation) projects aimed at bringing partner countries together, fostering cross border work between academics, private business and the public sector. The Welsh part of the three and a half year project – worth 1 million Euro to Wales - was set up by the Forestry Commission Wales Funding Team.

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Forestry Commission Wales Director Simon Hewitt – speaking at the official launch of Robinwood in Brussels on Tuesday 15 February said: “Forestry has an important role to play in the future of rural Europe.

“Sharing information, best practice and new ideas across six member states can only help ensure a dynamic future for an industry which can provide so many diverse opportunities for job and wealth creation.

“Timber production, and adding value to that timber within rural communities is of vital importance, but energy from wood fuel, protection of the environment and the increasing use of woodlands for recreation are already giving us new ways of providing rural areas with valuable new income. And Wales is proud to be playing a lead role, sharing the skills and knowledge that have been built up by Welsh foresters over the years with our partners in Europe,” he said.

Robinwood’s main task is to provide a dynamic new way forward for European forestry – and change political perception of the role woodlands can play in the social and economic future of rural communities.

The Welsh strand of the work will pull together information on how forests in at least three of the countries are looked after now, and how best methods can be used and developed across all six regions.

“We are very pleased to have been given a leading role in this exciting project which will offer real benefits to rural areas across Europe,” said Owen Thurgate, Programme Manager for Wales.

“The quality of forest management in Wales is internationally recognised, the whole of the Welsh Assembly forest has won certification for its high standard of management –,” he said.

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Key areas of work for the Welsh team include putting together innovative European wide:

- forestry development plans
- regional woodland policies
- production opportunities
- biodiversity protection plans
- sustainable development plans

The Aberystwyth based team will also be working with partners on identifying specialist management methods to:

- Promote forests, timber and manufacture as a key source of new business opportunities.
- Develop wood fuel as a serious alternative to fossil fuels.
- Further research how woodlands can help reduce flooding

The team will be responsible for working with Welsh business, forestry specialists in the private and public sectors and others, co-ordinating surveys and reports put together by experts including universities, timber and energy companies and Forestry Commission research personnel. Additionally the team will be drawing up mini funding programmes which will be carried out by cross border partnerships.

Once the initial survey work has identified a 'state of the nation' picture of how forestry is managed across all six countries, work will then start on identifying what works best – and sharing that information for mutual benefit.

Strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats will all be identified, with a final report on the way forward that will inform policy and potentially change the way Europe's forests are managed.

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“There is no doubt that in three years time we shall have identified many new ways for forestry to play an even greater role in ensuring a viable, ongoing future for our rural communities,” said Owen Thurgate.

“But one of the other benefits will be that we will have brought forestry experts across all six countries closer together, working together for mutual advantage and building relationships that will pay dividends for Europe in the future,” he said.

Brandenburg, Germany; Liguria, northern Italy; Murcia, southern Spain; Pomorskie, Poland, Wales and Eastern Slovakia have worked in close collaboration on the project and will continue their co-operation by exchanging details of their own experiences and by working together to define new initiatives. Each of the partners brings specific fields of expertise, current relations and the presence of similar problems. Liguria and Murcia have similar hydrogeological risk factors and are already taking part in a European Union project; Liguria and Brandenburg are well acquainted as members of the same European network (FEDARENE); Brandenburg and Pomoroskie have close contacts; Wales has specialised knowledge in the use of wood for social objectives; eastern Slovakia is characterised by complex hydrological conditions and large areas of woodland.

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15.02.05

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Editor's note: Robinwood is a cross-border European project aimed at identifying how forests, trees and timber across Europe can play a vital role in the revitalisation of rural communities through new business opportunities, flood prevention and wood fuel energy. It is hoped that it will also change political perception of the role woodlands can play in the social and economic future of rural communities and build new links between the partner countries involved.

Robinwood will promote the sustainable development of rural areas and overcome obstacles to progress by creating: a woodland chain process - territorial promotion, marketing - new techniques in forestry development - certification, policy changes, silviculture - hydrogeological improvements - models to prevent instability and reduce risks promotion of wood as a fuel source for energy - new management/technologies.

Analyses, sharing of experiences, the creation of new approaches, pilot projects, the preparation of operational and promotional plans and promotions will be used to achieve these. Direct results will be: workshops, meetings, studies, reports, master plans, promotion campaigns, events, maps, networks, partnerships, surveys and directives. Certain activities will be carried out by means of sub-projects assigned by means of open invitations to tender.