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Private woodlands – the new hope for rural Europe ?

Private woodland owners across Europe are having a tough time – without new markets to maximise their opportunities it is often simply not economic to manage and harvest their woodlands.

Now Robinwood, the ground-breaking Forestry Commission Wales project which aims to show how best forestry practices can help provide jobs and new income across regions of rural Europe, is looking at alternatives that are already beginning to open up private woodlands for business again.

And the Aberystwyth based team discovered how in northern Italy, new Government initiatives are already beginning to bring the mountain forests of sweet chestnut back into management – providing new work and green energy for rural communities.

“The main driver for change in Liguria is the terrible flooding which has claimed lives in the past,” said Robinwood, Wales project manager Kim Burnham. “Now the Mountain Communities – the lowest tier of local government – have been given the remit to look into the problem and they have come up with a practical solution.”

Poor returns on timber have meant that most of the forests on the steep mountainsides have been neglected for more than 50 years – and the formerly coppiced sweet chestnuts have outgrown their root systems. **mf**

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The severe winter weather – snow, hoar frost, high winds – brings many of the trees down, opening up the mountain side so that when the thaw comes mud, rocks, branches and whole trees are washed down the slopes blocking water courses and causing flooding in downstream villages.

“The Italian answer is to put a value back into the wood so that the forests become viable economically – and they have done that by setting up community wood-energy heating systems,” said Kim.

At Rossiglione, a village with a population of 1,500 just north of Genova that means the installation of a 1 megawatt CHP boiler which provides heat for the local school, hospital, municipal building and station. The new scheme is up and running, providing green energy for the village, new local jobs in the forest, local energy from local fuel and new opportunities for local businessmen.

“The clever thing is that by starting to coppice the woodlands again, the Italians are also beginning to solve their flooding problems. It is a win-win for the environment, tackling soil erosion on the hills and reducing emissions by using wood instead of fossil fuels,” Kim added.

Meanwhile in Wales, the Wood Energy Business Scheme – another Forestry Commission Wales initiative, grant funded by the Welsh Assembly and Europe - is working hard to achieve similar new business for woodland owners.

The Aberystwyth based project helps and supports businesses which want to switch to wood energy to control costs and use a renewable power source. So far a total of 31 systems are already on line throughout Wales and another 26 are in the pipeline for this year alone.

“By encouraging the switch to wood energy across Wales, WEBS is helping provide a market for wood-chip across Wales, increasing the value of timber, and providing new opportunities for the private woodland sector,” said Kim.

Robinwood, the Forestry Commission Wales European Interreg IIIc project with five partners across Europe is playing a key part in providing an important platform for the interchange of technologies and information for an industry which can play a vital role in the future for jobs and incomes in Wales. As well as working on wood fuel, the Aberystwyth-based Robinwood team is responsible for the major component of the £4 million cross border project – looking at how forests, trees and timber can revitalise rural communities through new business opportunities

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Editor’s notes:

- At present there are 31 scale wood heating systems operational throughout Wales. They consume just over 2460 tonnes of wood chips, pellets and logs.
- Robinwood has given Wales its first opportunity to be 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 is worth 1 million Euros to Wales.