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Snapshot captures true state of Wales' fledgling wood fuel industry

The true state of Wales' fledgling wood fuel industry will be uncovered in the first phase of a ground-breaking 'first' project for Wales showing how best forestry practices can help provide jobs and new income across rural Europe.

Robinwood – a Forestry Commission Wales European Interreg project - is helping point the way to a sustainable future through trees and timber across Italy, Germany, Spain, Poland, Slovakia and Wales.

And in one of the first elements of the £4 million project, the Robinwood team is linking up with the Mid Wales Energy Agency to find out just how far Wales has come in establishing wood fuel as a viable, sustainable alternative to fossil fuels.

“We believe that we may be on the verge of a breakthrough, that projects are really starting to happen on the ground now,” said the Agency's Technical Officer, Brian Horne. “But the situation is still unclear, and perhaps not as promising as many believe. Our biggest problem is not that wood fuel is too expensive, rather than that fossil fuels are still too cheap.

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“However the recent hikes in oil and gas prices have already started to focus the minds of people in rural Wales on looking more seriously at alternatives,” he said.

His team's task over the next six weeks is to take a complete overview of the state of the market and the state of the industry in consultation with public and private sectors, academics, consultants and NGOs – and then make ‘an informed guess’ what the truth is.

Already two ‘hotspots’, where wood fuel projects have taken off, have been identified in Powys and Pembrokeshire. The estimate is that there are around 50 projects all told being worked on throughout Wales at the moment.

But so far the majority are being commissioned by environmentalists – eager to use a natural, renewable, carbon dioxide neutral fuel source which is clean, efficient – and locally sourced.

“The industry has to build confidence in this our oldest and most reliable fuel because the more systems that are installed, and the more wood fuel that is used, the more the prices will come down,” said Robinwood manager Owen Thurgate,

“We have large timber resources in Wales, 13 per cent of the country is covered in trees, and the new technology that has been developed in countries like Finland where they rely heavily on wood for heat and light makes it extremely efficient.

“We believe that wood fuel's time is coming, that the industry can provide real jobs and incomes across rural Wales, but this major research project will give us a definitive answer.

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“Once we know where we are now, we can take the opportunity to go forward and identify ways to make wood fuel work with help from our partners in Europe, many of whom have specialist knowledge and know-how that we can tap into,” he added.

This is the first active part of the project for FC Wales, which manages the Welsh Assembly forest, which aims 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.

And 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.

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.

The team will be 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 others.

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.

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 exchanging details of their own experiences and working together on new initiatives.

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Each of the partners brings specific fields of expertise, current relations and the presence of similar problems. Liguria and Murcia have similar hydro geological 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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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 - hydro geological 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.