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Wales is pioneering 'spy in the sky' techniques to tackle flood erosion

Wales is pioneering the use of digital aerial photography coupled to computerised mapping to identify high risk flood erosion areas - and targetting special measures to tackle those risks.

Research by Forestry Commission Wales has shown that the high-tech techniques can pin point areas where trees can be planted to prevent top-soil and river banks from being washed away.

And already green engineering is helping to prevent erosion, FC Wales researcher Tom Nesbit told a Robinwood conference on Hydrology in Murcia, southern Spain.

"Our work so far has shown that there is a very good case for using woodlands to protect soile and prevent run off," Tom told delegates from all the partner regions of the European Interreg 111c RFO (Regional Framework Operation) project – funded in Wales by the European Union and Welsh Assembly Government - aimed at bringing partner countries together, fostering cross border work between academics, private business and the public sector.

Forestry specialists and academics from Wales joined up with their opposite numbers from Italy, Spain, Germany and Slovakia for the first time to set up work schedules for work that will help give forestry a major new role to play in rural regeneration.

They also heard about some of the latest work being carried out in partner regions to tackle problems associated with climate change, soil erosion and irrigation.

“In Wales we have brought in best practice guidelines to make sure that forests can be managed to minimise the problems associated with surface water run-off,” Tom Nesbit said.

“Tree planting helps improve the way water is taken into the soil rather than running off and causing erosion. Also helps to hold up sediment already in run off water.

“Using the latest technology and techniques we can identify which areas of land are most associated with erosion and then, working in partnership with landowners and other groups set about tackling those problems.”

Aerial photographs and GIS mapping systems show up patterns in erosion, highlighting the different soils which are more at risk of erosion. Rivers and streams are a particular source of erosion, with banks and channels at very high risk.

Larger scale planting on erosion prone soils to replace agriculture in a targeted way - planting only around areas of erosion - has been proven to reduce run off

“Targeting riparian areas means that woodland can act as a buffer and preventing dirty water getting into banks and eroding river reaches – an important water quality issue ,” Tom said.

And in Wales an integrated approach, using grants and subsidies in target areas to encourage farmers and landowners to plant to protect areas at risk is already beginning to pay off.

Robinwood is 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.

“We are very pleased to be playing a 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,” said Robinwood project manager Kim Burnham.

As well as working on hydrology, 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:

- 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.