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PROTECTING WELSH FORESTS FROM TINY FOREIGN INVADER

A tiny foreign invader could cause devastation in the forests of Wales. A Welsh fact finding mission was given a vivid reminder of the importance of strict import controls which protect our borders from pests when they visited a forest devastated by a small beetle in mainland Europe.

Thousands of hectares of forest were left at the mercy of a beetle called Ips Typographus, which kills spruce trees by laying its eggs in the bark before the hatching larvae 'ring bark' the trees as they eat through the soft growing flesh between bark and wood.

The damage caused was witnessed by a delegation from Wales representing Robinwood, the Forestry Commission Wales project which is working in Europe to find new ways of making timber and forestry play a crucial role in rural regeneration.

This tiny beetle – comparatively common in Europe but completely absent in the UK – is adding to the destruction of thousands of hectares of forests in Slovakia, one of the five partners in the project.

“You can see how hundreds of hectares of forest plantation is being decimated by this beetle, tons of timber will be lost, and fighting the infestation is a tough job,” said Robinwood forest research team member Chris Jones.

“It is a salutary warning for us about the effect of pests. Since Dutch Elm disease we in the UK have been very lucky. But the Ips Typographus could sweep through the Welsh

forest, which is a third Sitka Spruce, and destroy a cash crop that is worth millions to Wales.

“That is why it is important that strict border controls on timber should be maintained. Without them this little bug, which is moving across Europe towards us, could become a real threat.”

The Plant Health Service, part of the Forestry Commission, has qualified inspectors whose job is to inspect imported timber at the point of entry into the UK. They check for fungus and insects and have the power to refuse entry to any suspect timber.

“The importance of these controls are here for all to see. It is a valuable lesson for us to learn, and one which makes working within Europe so valuable for forestry and timber in Wales,” added Chris.

Most of the damage in Slovakia is being caused in the Tatra mountains, already reeling from a calamity in 2004 when a 130 mph storm swept over the mountains and flattened more than 12,000 hectares of forest in the heart of the country’s top tourist area.

Trees put under stress of any kind – the Ips feeds only on spruce – provide low resistance to the bug, which quickly established a foothold in the windblow. Now, just over two years on, it is moving into the living forest – and already giving cause for great concern.

During the Robinwood visit, Slovakian Agriculture Minister Miroslav Jurena took part in a symbolic 2000 tree planting session at Vysoke Tatry.

Before the devastating storm – and then the arrival of Ips typographus - the trees provided a scenic backdrop to one of the most visited tourist areas in Slovakia and one of its better known skiing areas. There are fears that visitor numbers will be affected because of the carnage and that valuable income will be lost.

But the Slovakian forest in general is in good shape – and with more than 75 per cent of the land under forest it is big enough to continue to provide timber for the country. Forests and woodlands cover just 14 per cent of Wales.

“The foresters in Slovakia have a big job on their hands, controlling the pests that have taken advantage of the high levels of stress that the forest has been put under,” said Chris.

“Our concern is that under climate change scenarios, pests from Europe and elsewhere may find suitable conditions in Wales – and as spruce makes up more than 33 per cent of our crop and the Ips affects only spruce the danger is obvious.”

Wales has Robinwood partners in Italy, Germany, Slovakia and Spain. It has given Wales its first opportunity to be part of the European Interreg 111c RFO (Regional Framework Operation) programme aimed at bringing partner countries together, fostering cross border work between academics, private business and the public sector.

It 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 promotes the sustainable development of rural areas and has identified ways to 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 are being to achieve these. Direct results so far include workshops, meetings, studies, reports, master plans, promotion campaigns, events, maps, networks, partnerships, and surveys.

More details from Kim Burnham - e-mail kim.burnham@forestry.gsi.gov.uk – tel: 08456 040845 or on the Robinwood web-site: www.robin-wood.it.

Contact: Kim Burnham, Robinwood, Wales programme manager **Tel: 0845 6040845.**

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.