First European Conference on Small Forest Holdings

The “1st European Conference on Small Forest Holdings” (SFH) took place from 20 to 22 May 2025 at the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) headquarters in Rome, with the participation of representatives of the Association of Public and Private Forest Owners of the Banská Bystrica Region.

It was a major event within the framework of SMURF, which addresses the challenge in Europe, with opportunities to support small forest owners in. The event attracted more than 2000 participants, representatives of public institutions, private organizations, NGOs, forest owners’ associations and other stakeholders from all over Europe.

Objectives and thematic focus

The conference aimed to foster discussion on:
• the current state of small forest owners in Europe,
• legislative and financial support mechanisms,
• small forest owners’ initiative,
• value chains based on wood and non-wood forest products
• markets for ecosystem services.

It also addressed challenges such as forest land abandonment, low profitability, fragmentation of ownership and sufficient cooperation between owners.

One of the main objectives was the role of forest owners’ associations in strengthening local value chains and disseminating the principles of sustainable forest management within the EU. In addition, the conference served as a space to create a community of practice for small forest owners – for the exchange of knowledge, experience and cooperation between Member States.

The conference lasted three days and included:

• expert lectures,
• panel discussions,
• technical thematic sessions (joint workshops and sessions),
• networking activities,

The program was divided into 9 thematic sessions, covering a broader framework of challenges, opportunities and solutions for small forest owners.

At the networking party during the excursion, participants had the opportunity to meet 35 representatives from the first SMURF call and establish informal contacts.

The conference resulted in significant outputs:

• Conference conclusions – a document summarizing the discussion, challenges and recommendations, which are made available to participants and the public. (https://www.smurfproject.eu/conference-sfh/)
• A clearer understanding of the specific needs of small forest owners in different EU countries, in particular regarding access to finance, support and owner involvement.

• Highlighting the importance of tailored policies that take into account the diversity of ownership structures (e.g. small private ownership, jointly managed lands, collective ownership).
• Calling for more intensive support for owners' associations and collective cooperation at local and regional level.
• Identifying barriers in practice – such as bureaucratic demands, financial incentives, fragmentation of forest lands, limited capacity of owners to manage aspects of forest governance and management.
• Moving towards the creation of a community of practice that will enable long-term cooperation, knowledge exchange and support between stakeholders across Europe.
The conference thus represents an important milestone in the effort to better integrate small forest ownership into EU policy, national forestry strategies and support systems.

Significance for Slovakia

Although the conference was held in Rome and in an international format, its conclusions and recommendations are also relevant for Slovak small forest owners. Slovakia has a relatively developed ownership structure based on Hungarian land law. Many owners do not have forest property as a priority source of income and therefore the fragmentation of forest property, low yields, bureaucracy and limited possibilities of technical and financial support are also limiting for the management of forest land.
The implementation of the recommendations from the conference should help us:
• preserve and operate the functioning of local associations of forest owners,
• exchange experiences between owners,
• ensure that national policies (including subsidy programs) will respond sensitively to the specific needs of small owners,
• improve access to financing for projects related to sustainable forest management, biodiversity protection and the provision of ecosystem services.

A significant contribution of the conference was the introduction of the Laurus network, which was created to support forest owners' organizations in Europe and offers access to webinars, new business models, connections with people who have successfully used forestry practices and can gain valuable knowledge to increase competitiveness. Laurus is also dedicated to the voluntary carbon market and land use projects for carbon sequestration. This could open up new financing opportunities for Slovak small forests. The network enables the dissemination and adaptation of new European policies in the field of forests, climate change and ecosystem sustainability.

The Association of Community and Private Forest Owners of the Banská Bystrica Region will join the European Forest Owners Network and will better present Slovak conditions in forestry, gain access to European projects and cooperate on joint initiatives.

SMURF
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