

SMALL FOREST OWNERS IN EUROPE: INSIGHTS FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN MODEL FOREST NETWORK

A SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS BY TONI VENTRE AND PABLO SABIN

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At this year's Ontario Woodlot Association Conference, forest owners and professionals from across the province and globe gathered to exchange ideas and explore new approaches to sustainable forestry and its concurrent challenges. Among the compelling presentations were those by Toni Ventre, Forest Engineer in Italy and General Secretary of the Mediterranean Model Forest Network (MMFN), and Pablo Sabin, Forest Engineer and CEO of Cesefor in Spain. Their message resonated with Ontario's private woodlot owners: small forest owners in Europe are facing many of the same challenges—and they are finding creative ways to respond.

The MMFN is part of the International Model Forest Network, which began in Canada and now includes ten Model Forests, along with several candidates and initiatives. The MMFN adapts the Model Forest concept to the unique landscapes of the Mediterranean, which is the second most important biodiversity hotspot in the world, but often fragile and under pressure from climate change, urbanization, and rural depopulation. All countries in the Mediterranean basin are facing serious threats. Average temperatures are rising more and faster than the global average, and many rural areas are losing population while coastal zones grow more crowded. These shifts have led to a disconnect between people and the forests they own, resulting in a lack of management and increasing vulnerability to wildfire and ecological degradation.

In Tuscany, for example, which represents the most forested region in Italy (1.1 million hectares), 85% of forested land

are privately owned and all policy efforts are addressed to improve sustainable active forest management by exploring new solutions in order to engage private owners.

Because these challenges are shared, although with their own specificities by all forests around Mediterranean sea, Toni Ventre explained that the MMFN's mission is to promote sustainable forest management and landscape restoration through collaboration and knowledge sharing. He emphasized the need to reconnect people with their forests and encourage responsible stewardship. One of the biggest challenges, he noted, is the low economic value currently placed on forests when only timber is considered. In Italy, and the situation is quite similar in other Mediterranean countries within the European Union, forested areas contribute less than 0.1 percent to the national GDP, making them politically and economically overlooked. Many owners lack the knowledge or incentive to manage their forests sustainably, and traditional practices like coppicing are often inefficient or outdated.

To address these issues, the MMFN is promoting different strategic actions such as forest certification programs like the Forest Stewardship Council and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification, which help ensure sustainable practices and introduce new markets. Certification is growing rapidly—in 2024, certified forest area in Italy increased by 37%, with Tuscany seeing a 20% annual rise. The network is also encouraging forest owners to think beyond timber, recognizing the value of ecosystem services like carbon storage,



Toni Ventre.

tourism, education, and even forest therapy. By diversifying the benefits forests can offer, owners have more reasons to invest in their care.

Another key strategy is aggregation. Many forest parcels are small and fragmented, making management difficult. Through laws, subsidies, and cooperative models, the MMFN is helping owners unify their efforts and manage land more effectively. Public awareness campaigns and educational programs are also central to the network's work, aiming to restore a sense of responsibility and connection among forest owners. Fiscal incentives, such as tax breaks for silviculture, are being explored to make sustainable practices more financially viable.

Finally, it is essential to promote policies that redress the imbalance between rural and urban areas, helping society as a whole to understand the fundamental role played by communities that manage forests and landscapes in a sustainable manner, ensuring benefits that everyone can enjoy.





Pablo Sabin.

Pablo Sabin's presentation focused on the SMURF Project—short for Sustainable Management models and value chains for small Forests—a major European Union (EU) initiative led by the partnering foundation, Cesefor. With over €5 million in funding and ten partners across six countries, SMURF is working to make small forest holdings more profitable and sustainable. Sabin described forest fragmentation as the biggest challenge facing small forest owners in Mediterranean Europe. With over 60 million private forest owners across the continent, many forests are broken into small, isolated patches (often less than 0.5 ha in size). This fragmentation not only reduces biodiversity and disrupts ecosystems but also makes effective management and market access much more difficult.

Sabin explained that forest income is often irrelevant for owners, who may not see their land as a source of livelihood. To change that, SMURF is proposing a European classification system for forest holdings, recognizing their importance in achieving sustainability goals. The project is conducting surveys and benchmarking support systems across all 27 EU member states to better understand the needs of forest owners. It is also building collaborative networks to connect owners, managers, and policymakers in pursuit of shared solutions.

Innovation is a major focus of SMURF. The project is promoting new technologies

and business models to help overcome the challenges of inactive, fragmented forests. Research into traditional land uses and forest products is being paired with modern tools to enhance profitability and competitiveness. One promising approach is Closer to Nature Silviculture (CNS), which emphasizes biodiversity, long-term forest health, and low-impact management. CNS is being adopted in larger areas through cooperatives and associations, but Sabin stressed that incentives are needed to help small owners make the transition.

Carbon projects and afforestation efforts are also part of the SMURF strategy, supported by new EU frameworks that aim to create demand and willingness to pay for ecosystem services. Sabin emphasized that governments must take responsibility for building these frameworks, while forest owners and managers must proactively develop solutions that work for their specific contexts. To foster collaboration and share best practices, SMURF organized the first European conference on small forest holdings in May 2025, with over 40 organizations committing to partake in piloting actions.



Each speaker received a handmade cutting board made of locally sourced walnut, maple, oak, and birch by local woodworker Robert Magee. An OWA member and volunteer branded and oiled the boards.

Sabin's core message was simple: forests must be profitable to be sustainable. Without economic incentives, small forest owners are unlikely to invest in long-term stewardship. Profitability drives political interest, public support, and owner engagement. Sustainable practices require funding, and small-scale owners need to see a return on their efforts to participate fully in conservation and restoration initiatives.

For Ontario woodlot owners, the European perspective offers valuable lessons. Certification and ecosystem services can add value beyond timber, and cooperatives and networks help overcome fragmentation. Education and outreach reconnect people with their forests, and policy support makes sustainable practices feasible.

The Mediterranean Model Forest Network and the SMURF Project show that small forest owners—whether in Europe or Ontario—are vital to the future of sustainable forestry. With the right tools, partnerships, and incentives, even the smallest woodlot can contribute to biodiversity, climate resilience, and rural vitality. 🌲

