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SMURF PROJECT HOLDS SIXTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN EGER TO ADVANCE SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT FOR SMALL FOREST OWNERS

- ***The SMURF consortium gathered in Eger, Hungary, on 4–5 November 2026 to review project progress, coordinate upcoming activities, and define the next steps towards the final stages of implementation.***
- ***Partners discussed key areas including Cascade Funding, Closer-to-Nature Silviculture, collaborative pilot approaches, the SMURF carbon scheme, EU policy guidelines and communication activities.***
- ***The General Assembly also included a field trip hosted by Szent Hubertus '94 KFT., providing partners with first-hand insight into local forest management practices in Hungary.***

(Eger, Hungary – 6 November 2026) – The SMURF project (Sustainable Management models and valUe chains foR small Forests) successfully held its Sixth General Assembly in Eger, Hungary, on 4–5 November 2026. Hosted by recipient of Cascade Funding Szent Hubertus '94 KFT., the two-day meeting brought together SMURF consortium partners to review the progress achieved so far, exchange knowledge and coordinate the next steps of the project.

The first day of the General Assembly opened at the Municipality of Eger with registration and welcome remarks from the Mayor of Eger, Szent Hubertus '94 KFT., and CESEFOR. This was followed by an overall review of the project's current status and upcoming steps, led by SMURF Project Coordinator Álvaro Picardo (CESEFOR).

A substantial part of the day was dedicated to strategic and technical discussions on the next steps of the SMURF project. Partners exchanged experiences and reviewed progress on key areas such as closer-to-nature forest management, collaboration with local stakeholders and the development of practical solutions to support small forest owners. The discussions helped identify priorities for the coming months and strengthen cooperation across the consortium.

The afternoon continued with discussions on the CNS wave, the SMURF carbon scheme and EU policy guidelines. These sessions brought together partners working across different areas of the project to explore how SMURF's tools, approaches and results can contribute to more sustainable and resilient forest management for small forest holdings.

The second day combined project coordination with a practical field component. Partners first addressed the EU Conference, followed by a dedicated session on the review of SMURF communication activities, led by Contactica together with CESEFOR.

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Discussions also covered the next steps for the Laurus Network and other issues relevant to the consortium.

The day continued with a field trip hosted by Szent Hubertus '94 KFT., taking partners from Eger to a local Hunting Lodge. The visit provided an opportunity to connect SMURF's project work with practical forest management approaches in Hungary. According to the planned programme, the field visit focused on close-to-nature thinning in oak stands to support the transition towards continuous forest cover, as well as black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) management, a distinctive plantation management practice in Hungary.

On-the-Gound Management in Ivád

During the visit to Ivád, participants examined local forest blocks situated between 250 and 350 meters in altitude, with an average age of 65 to 70 years. These stands – featuring an average height of 20 meters and a standing stock between 250 and 300 m^2/ha – are dominated by Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*) and sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*), alongside a secondary canopy of hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) and valuable broadleaves like wild cherry, wild pear, and maple species.

To counter growing abiotic stress, Szent Hubertus '94 Kft. initiated a transition roughly five years ago towards continuous forest cover. By conducting negative selection thinnings and opening small canopy gaps, forest managers are mimicking natural regeneration processes, boosting species diversity, and maintaining a mosaic structure that accommodates drought-tolerant species like *Quercus rubra*.

The visit also shed light on critical environmental pressures facing local forest managers:

- **Escalating Drought Conditions:** Historical annual rainfall averages of 600–800 mm dropped sharply to 377 mm in 2025, reaching just 207 mm during the first 10 months of 2026.
- **Wildlife Pressure:** High deer population densities continue to pose significant risks of game damage, highlighting the limits of past national hunting policies in controlling wildlife impacts.

Overall, the field trip emphasized the crucial role of cross-border knowledge exchange, illustrating how adaptive silviculture can assist small forest holders across Europe in creating resilient forests prepared for future climate realities.

The Sixth General Assembly in Eger provided an important opportunity for the SMURF consortium to consolidate progress, strengthen cooperation among partners and connect the project's technical and policy work with practical experiences from the field. By bringing together project partners, forestry stakeholders and different areas of

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expertise, the meeting reinforced SMURF's commitment to developing practical solutions that can support small forest owners and promote sustainable forest management across Europe.

For detailed information about the SMURF project cascade funding, eligibility criteria, and application process, please visit the project website.

About SMURF: It is a Horizon Europe project, aligned with the EU's Forest Strategy, that addresses the problems of Small Forest Holdings (lack of professionalism, low profitability, fragmented ownership, risk of abandonment and insufficient professional support) attempting to identify and develop viable solutions from across EU and worldwide. Including innovative business models and business opportunities, simple Systems of Payments for Ecosystem Services, Joint Management and Forest Land Consolidation, improved support systems and simplified regulation, that could promote sustainable forest management. By tailoring solutions for small forest properties, SMURF enhances carbon farming, biodiversity, and forest products' valorization. With a multidisciplinary approach and diverse stakeholder engagement, SMURF provides holistic sustainability solutions across the forest-based value chain.

Ten organizations from Spain, Belgium, Italy, France, Portugal, and Denmark collaborate with a translational, multidisciplinary, and multi-actor approach. This project is granted by the European Research Executive Agency (REA) under the Horizon Europe program.

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