

1ST EUROPEAN CONFERENCE **SMALL FOREST HOLDINGS**

20 » 22
MAY 2025

ROME » ITALY
FAO Headquarters

CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS

Guiding Future Action for Small Forest Holdings Across Europe

Horizon Europe SMURF project

1st European Conference on Small Forest Holdings

Rome, 20-22 May 2025

Venue: **FAO Headquarters - Red Room**

Full video recording available at: <https://www.smurfproject.eu/conference-sfh/#video>



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More than 200 attendees, representing over 40 different Forest Owner Organizations across Europe and many other stakeholders from forest-based value chains, gathered at FAO headquarters in Rome from 20 to 22 May 2025 to discuss the main issues affecting European small forest holdings, including their challenges and opportunities.



The conference served as a valuable opportunity to raise awareness of the challenges and opportunities faced by small forest holdings. It fostered meaningful discussions among a wide range of European forest stakeholders regarding the role of small forest owners in delivering the products and ecosystem services expected from Europe's forests -both for present needs and for future generations- while promoting profitability to ensure the long-term sustainability of small forest holdings.

Organized into nine technical sessions and featuring 47 panelists, the event provided a platform for exchange, leading participants to draw the following conclusions:

1. **Forest holdings and forest owners** are the **fundamental pillars of the different forest-based value chains**, delivering the goods and services that Europeans and beyond, now and in the future, benefit from forests and other wooded land. Support from and cooperation with other stakeholders in the value chains will strengthen the entire forest-based sector.
2. **Forest owner organizations**, coordinated in Europe by [CEPE](#), [ELO](#), [COPA-COGECA](#), [FECOF](#), and [EUSTAFOR](#), **play a key role in safeguarding the interests** of forest owners and forest holdings, in the **promotion of sustainable forest management and cooperation among forest holdings**, at different territorial levels, from local to global.
3. Small forest holdings and forest owners in the European Union and worldwide **are facing many challenges and increased risks** in the context of global change and **suffer serious structural problems** that limit their ability to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the **European Forest Strategy goals**.
4. The **major challenges** include **low profitability** and **limited income opportunities**, an extreme **fragmentation of private ownership** and land in some regions, the fact that **most forest holders are not forestry professionals**, combined with **complex regulations, insufficient support systems** available, and a serious **lack of basic knowledge of their reality** in most countries. All these hinder the development and the advancement of small forest holdings towards sustainable, multifunctional forest management. Therefore, **forest land abandonment is a growing and serious risk** all over Europe.
5. The **agricultural sector was facing similar problems decades ago** and the past successful, ambitious agricultural policies **might provide transferable solutions for forests**. The SFH conference showcased the **diversity of existing solutions** for most of the problems discussed, yet there is a **need to assess and to systematize transferable solutions and to speed up sharing and exchange of knowhow** with all the European regions and worldwide. **Social innovation, digitalization and mechanization** need to be reinforced as main trends for innovation in forestry. Most importantly, Europe **needs to investment in people's awareness and in skilled forest professionals, engaging young foresters**, as future workforce to enlarge the capacities for interaction with numerous social interest groups.
6. **Sustainability cannot be achieved without securing profitability**: economic diversification can strengthen both profits and sustainability, **although non-financial motivations are also important drivers** for management of private forests. The decreasing income margins for forest holdings in globalized, very competitive and in some cases underregulated forest product markets and the social changes of the land ownership, with old and too few people remaining in rural areas, are major threats for forest regions across Europe, where sustainable

forest management was well established before, or where new forests have been established. The **growing wood sector and bioeconomy** with novel uses, products, and value chains, represent clear opportunities to revitalize forest regions. New income sources might come from **new non-wood products markets**, like carbon, biodiversity and nature credits or other nature-based products. But there is also a need for improved **compensation** for all the increasing limitations and burdens on private land ownership, and **subsidies** for investments into large-scale climate adaptation of **resilient forest landscapes**.

7. In terms of **public and private financing for small forest holdings**, actions must be taken. European and national funds should be guaranteed in the long term, at adequate levels to subsidize investments needed to implement and maintain sustainable forest management and to develop resilient landscapes, by *promoting joint management, land consolidation and forest planning*. A special **forest allocation fund**, stable over time and financed with contributions by tourists or water consumers, as an example, would be a powerful instrument.
8. **The multitude of forest authorities** responsible on different levels in the European Union and the **limited cross-regional exchange and coordination** hampers advancing towards a common conceptual and minimum legal framework for forest holdings, as a reference for EU countries with less developed frameworks. Small forest holdings in general, and Forest Owner Organizations in particular, are in **need for more dedicated technical and financial support. Cooperation with tax authorities, cadasters and land registries** will be essential to curb the ownership fragmentation.
9. **A strategic dialogue on forests with all stakeholders is needed**, including underrepresented voices, **to fully promote forest ecosystem services and climate resilience adaptation**. Growing societal demands on forests and addressing higher risks require more diverse, **closer to nature forestry and multifunctional silvicultural models**. These need to be recognized and be integrated into European forest scenarios, acknowledging that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to forest management. **Integrated forest management** approaches are more appropriate in the context of Europe's cultural landscapes than approaches favoring segregation of forest functions. The multifunctional management of public forests may be a good example and a catalyst of sustainable management initiatives at the larger **landscape scale**.
10. The SFH conference has **increased the visibility of small forest holdings** and the possibilities for cross-regional exchange of experiences and mutual learning. The **LAURUS Network has been launched to support European Forest Owner Organizations** by offering training, knowledge sharing and new collaborations.

KEY OUTCOMES FROM EACH SESSION

SESSION 1 | POLICY, RESEARCH AND MANAGEMENT



Forest owners and forest holdings are the **fundamental pillars of the different forest-based value chains**, delivering the goods and services that Europeans, now and in the future, expect from forests and other wooded land.



In Europe there are **well organized and structured Forest Owner Organizations** like CEPF, ELO and COPA-COGECA, that work together, to overcome the challenges of fragmentation and abandonment, limited resources and economic viability and the many legal and structural barriers.



The SMURF project might be useful to **increase the visibility of small forest holdings** and the possibilities for networking and to promote knowledge exchange and learning.



Forest owners are solution providers, not obstacles. Policy makers must respect ownership, ensure the protection of ownership rights, enable sustainable forest management, and provide support for forest holdings and a robust **bioeconomy**. When restrictions are applied to management/property- fair compensation for losses is needed.



There is a need to **increase the knowledge of forest holdings and forest owners** in Europe, that are not known in many countries. While the number of farms is perfectly known and decreasing in the last 30 years and now is around 9 million, the number of forest holdings is unknown, estimated to be around 16 million and increasing. To address data gaps, the EU might promote a **permanent periodic Survey** like the US National Woodland Survey.

SESSION 2 | LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS TO SMALL FOREST HOLDINGS



The legal and regulatory framework for forest holdings in Europe is too fragmented, complex, and rather conservative and strict, and it is missing a common basic framework, as it reflects forest multifunctionality and governance structures. There are also examples of innovative, sound, appropriate, favorable, effective, diverse, applicable, enforceable, and cooperative **legislation that could guide future revisions.**



Sound management of small forest holdings shall be shaped by the contours of **innovative forest laws and environmental legislation** which would consider the specific character of property rights, the interests of forest owners as well as the preferences of the whole society. Particularly, legislative **tools shall help solve the persistent conflicts between the economic interests of forest owners and social and environmental preferences** of the society.



There is a need in some countries to **clarify and precise the forest ownership rights**, revising the Cadastre and harmonizing it with the Land Registry System. The European Land Register Document (ELRD) might be a useful instrument in the harmonization of forest ownership rights and the protection of forests.



Forest holdings and forest owners need **support to deliver the goods and services that forests could provide.** National or regional forest ownership centers, like the French CNPF or the Finnish Metsakeskus, are very useful instruments that are adequately promoting **cooperation among forest holdings.**

SESSION 3 | HOW TO MAINTAIN THE SECTOR: FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR FOREST OWNERS



Private forest ownership is a fundamental element of the landscape and must be supported to fulfil its **role in sustainable forest management**.



EU policies, especially CAP and Horizon, are **foundational to supporting** - among others- **forest resilience and rural development**.



Funding alone is insufficient, but in some cases essential—**coordination, capacity building, and local empowerment** are indispensable.



Upcoming initiatives (e.g., carbon credits, bioeconomy strategy) represent **new avenues for value creation**.



A **multi-actor approach**—spanning governments, private investors, and communities—is required for long-term impact.

SESSION 4 | MULTIFUNCTIONAL FORESTS AND PAYMENT FOR ECOSYSTEM SERVICES (MARKETS & INCOMES)



There is clear **societal and policy demand** towards increased **multifunctionality**, even if there is not a common understanding on what this precisely means. There is a clear need to adapt multifunctionality to local conditions.



It is important to **increase knowledge, awareness, and tools** to advance towards multifunctionality.



Closer to Nature Silviculture (CNS) is an interesting alternative **available for small forest holdings**, that might be economically sustainable and applicable in the long term, although there is still need for more information about its possibilities and associated risks.



The guidelines for [Closer to Nature Forest Management](#) are one of such tools and are welcome, even if several participants highlighted the need to localize and adapt them to local conditions and to understand that CNS is just one method among others. Similarly, other **ecosystem services** also need attention, such as water provision or wildfire prevention in the Mediterranean region.



PES systems in very broad sense are one of such tools:



PES systems have not taken off in the last decades, despite having been permanently in the agenda.



In recent years, corporations (inside and outside the forest sector) are paying increased attention to forest resources and making resources available for more diverse and multifunctional management. This trend opens **new opportunities for PES type arrangements**.



It is important to guarantee that **these resources arrive to forest owners and managers**, avoiding that they are diluted along the value chain. Good practices have been presented by Preferred by Nature.



It is important to bundle **the most relevant ecosystem services** in each region, as carbon alone will not suffice.



The **landscape scale** must be considered when implementing PES systems. The Catalan climate credits provide an example on how to work at landscape level, instead of individual ownership level.



It is important that PES tools support not only set aside policies, but also **active forest management**, as appropriate in each case.



Governments have the responsibility to **create the frameworks for functional PES schemes**, including actions to create demand or willingness to pay. On the other hand, **forest owners and managers need to be proactive to develop those schemes that work for them.**

SESSION 5 | LAURUS NETWORK



Laurus is a new Network for **supporting the European Forest Owner Organizations' staff through offering training, innovation, and collaboration** to promote greater profitability and sustainability in the small-scale forestry sector.



LAURUS
Network



This initiative was born out of the SMURF project and represents one of its first outcomes. It is an evolving concept, shaped by the identification of specific needs within the sector. The focus of Laurus Network Laurus is to become a space for personal collaboration and for exchanging knowledge. Laurus Network will collaborate with personnel from other stakeholders of the sector such as forest authorities and support systems and forest industries and companies.



The Laurus Network will provide **several resources** in multiple languages, such as:



Practical, specialized training and webinars focused on tools to enhance knowledge and decision-making.



Innovative approaches, business models and real opportunities to boost both profitability and sustainability in forest management and direct connection with people successfully applying these ideas.



A space for peer connection, enabling technical staff from various organizations and countries to share experiences, and drive innovation in forestry.



To be part of Laurus Network you only have to register on its website (<https://www.laurusnetwork.eu/>) and you will have access to a **private area** within **exclusive contents** such as the upcoming webinars, training activities and more information.



For more information you can contact Elena Moreno (elena.moreno@cesefor.com)

SESSION 6 | INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO OVERCOME FOREST OWNERSHIP FRAGMENTATION



Forest ownership fragmentation is a **significant limiting factor in European forestry both at the economic and political level** with implications in forest management, sustainability, biodiversity conservation, climate policy, risk management, and resilience.



It is grounded in historical, social, cultural and legal causes that add complexity to forest planning and management.



There are, however, many **initiatives in Europe** at several scales (local, regional and national) that can provide inspiration and tools for the **development and implementation of solutions** in many geographic and ecological conditions.



It is important that these initiatives, their objectives, implementation, and results, can be **openly shared among European forest owners, managers, and decision makers** in pursuit of **solutions** for forest ownership fragmentation.



There is **no one-size-fits-all solution** in forestry. A wide variety of alternatives should be displayed, to be adapted to each local context and to the willing's of each particular group of forest owners.



The SMURF project, through initiatives such as the LAURUS Network and the Cascade Funding, and other similar projects are key in the promotion of existing innovative solutions that have the potential to contribute to overcome forest ownership fragmentation across Europe.

SESSION 7 | GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS & NEW BUSINESS MODELS



Innovation in **wood products** and **emerging bioeconomy markets** offer possibilities to create new uses and more demand for forest use, both timber and wild products (NWFP).



Demand for wood is likely to grow a lot and will increase competition for raw materials. In addition, **climate change** will become a major factor interfering with wood markets.



New initiatives and new business models oriented towards ecosystem services to overcome inactive, fragmented smallholder forests must aim **for enhancing profitability and competitiveness**. This means first gaining scale and efficiency (area of forest, number of owners, amount of harvest).



Traditional land use and forest products represent a **rich knowledge and cultural heritage**, which should be valued through more research and development.



Innovative industries can become drivers to stimulate such new forest owner' initiatives to group forest management activities, form associations and demonstrate new business cooperations.



More cooperation is needed along **the entire wood value chain**, bridging the gap between forest owners/managers, wood processing industries and even manufacturers of final products. **Cluster organizations and networks** can bring together all stakeholders and create a strong voice for innovation support and policy advocacy.

SESSION 8 | SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT ANSWERS TO FOREST OWNER MODELS NEEDS



Sustainable Forest Management faces increasing threats. Wildfires, pests, diseases, and invasive species are major risks requiring proactive and adaptive strategies to ensure forest resilience.



Integrated Forest Management is essential. Managing forests in a multifunctional and integrated way is key to balancing ecological, economic, and social functions. Public forests and their associations (eg. EUSTAFOR) often serve as good examples of integrated management, showing best practices in combining wood production, biodiversity conservation, recreation, and ecosystem services. These examples can inspire and guide private forest owners.



Forest owners need practical support and clear incentives. Harmonized and simplified regulations, financial support, and technical assistance are fundamental to help private owners actively engage in sustainable management.



Closer-to-Nature Silviculture (CNS) offers promising opportunities. This approach especially supports biodiversity and long-term forest health. Associations and cooperatives play a central role in checking its applicability in new areas, where more research is needed, and in promoting its adoption in larger areas. Incentives and more information are always needed to facilitate the transition to new practices and to manage increasing external pressures (e.g., climate change, market demands).



Certification schemes (PEFC & FSC) promote Integrated Forest Management. Both standards value integrated approaches, enhancing the sustainability and credibility of forest products. They are continuously evolving and FSC is already capturing closer-to-nature considerations. Forest owners can benefit from innovative tools aiming to diversify income through market driven initiatives, such as ecosystem services integration. Public support and group certification models are crucial to ease access to certification, especially for smallholders and for those adopting new silvicultural models.