

FLANDERS – Flemish Forest Group

A Forest Group is a voluntary partnership between both public and private forest owners. Through this cooperation, an attempt is made to provide an answer to problems caused by the fragmentation of the forest. Forest Groups offer a comprehensive service that helps the many forest owners manage their forest parcels.



Summary

Due to the fragmented nature of forest ownership, groups of private forest owners and managers (Forest Groups) have been established. These forest owner associations oversee voluntary co-operation between the large number of private forest owners and sometimes public forest managers. Their objective is implementation of improved and more coherent forest management practices. The 11 active Forest Groups in Flanders cover the whole territory and have almost 13.000 members (about 13% of all forest owners). The interests of the owners contracting membership are vested in the coordinated management of their forest parcels and the professional expertise and service they receive from the Forest Group. This represents i.a. administrative support, coaching and technical support, organization of joint wood sales, voluntary participation to projects or the setting up of combined management plans.

Objectives

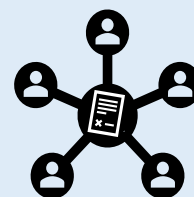
- Realization of afforestation and activation of forest compensation
- Development of profitable resilient forests
- Achievement of conservation objectives in Natura 2000 areas
- Management of fragmented forests
- Promotion of neighborhood and play forests
- Support of local production and processing of a climate-friendly raw material
- Support the livability of the local timber sector
- Ensuring support in Flanders for sustainable multifunctional forest management
- Appreciating private forest owners for their social commitment
- Support not only private forest management, but also public forest management



Problem description

Forest ownership in Flanders is very fragmented. Most forest owners often have very little knowledge of forest management and little trust in government handling as such. They do have faith in the Forest Groups. Within these Forest Groups, the aspects of trust and voluntary approach are predominant, giving the forest owner the necessary freedom of decision. They allow forest owners to incorporate the management of their forests in a larger project. Most owners are proud to be part of a process towards better forests. Many forest owners are also quite happy with the support they receive to manage the forests in a better way. In this sense, the Forest Groups act as promoters and facilitators of a global forest policy. Small forest owners, who have no obligation to produce a management plan, often have an 'ad hoc' management, using felling applications and permits. They are stimulated by the Forest Groups to participate in joint management plans.

COOPERATION



Flemish Forest Groups allow forest owners to incorporate the management of their forests in a larger project. Furthermore, the Forest Group provides assistance: the coordinator is a skilled forester who gives both coaching and technical support to the members and helps organizing joint wood sales and management plans. Members of the Forest Group are stimulated to participate in joint management plans.

PUBLIC GOODS



Landscape and scenery



Recreational access /
Improvements to physical
and mental health



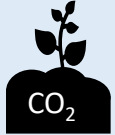
Biodiversity



Air quality



Soil quality (and health)



Climate regulation - carbon storage



Rural viability and vitality



Resilience to natural hazards



Cultural heritage

CONTRACT

Contract conclusion:

Membership of legal entity (association without lucrative purpose under Belgian law, *vereniging zonder winstoogmerk*)

Payment mechanism:

No specific mechanism, membership of the association suffices



Financing party:

Government (sometimes with EU-funding)



Length of participation in scheme:

Duration of the membership

Start and end of the program:

Membership of the Forest Group

Data and Facts - Contract

Contract feature combination:

The membership of the Forest Groups makes possible to participate to management plans or projects, of which terms are further specified in additional contractual documents.

Participation:

- Number of members: almost 13.000
- Area of implementation: Flemish Region of Belgium; each of the 11 actual Forest Groups have a specific working area. A forest owner/manager can become member of the Forest Group in which working area his forest parcels are situated.

Involved parties: The Flemish Forest Group is a private association of forest owners and managers. Their interests are vested in the management of their forest parcels and the expertise service they receive from the Forest Group.

Advantages of participation:

- The private association is one of forest owners and managers
- Forest owners and managers maintain control over property
- Free advice without engagement
- Respect for the objectives of owners and managers
- Neutral and independent approach
- Voluntary and easy membership
- Reduce the elements that remove motivation (administration (for free), costs (fees for collective sale of timber only 5-10-15%) , paternalism of state management).

Management requirements: Specific requirements for foresters depend on specific management plans or projects they contract to.

Controls/monitoring: A Forest Group coordinator and his team follow up on the specific projects or objectives agreed upon by the different forest owners, members of the Forest Group. The content of the projects or objectives to be monitored depends on what objectives or project has been agreed upon.

Conditions of participation: Conditions of participation are specified in the articles of association. Minimum of participants is the minimum number of members for legally constituting a private association.

Risk/uncertainties of participants: Risk of participants depend on the quality of advice and service delivered by the Forest Group team.

Links to other contractual relationships: Forest Groups aim at having members participating in projects and nature management plans. Such participation is then linked to membership.

Contract partnership: Government provides the funding of a private association if such association is recognized as a Forest Group; forest managers and owners contract the goals of the Forest Group through membership; civil society goals are served by the working of the Forest Group.

Funding/payments: The funding organization is the Flemish government acting through the Flemish provincial authorities, as well as diverse project funding the Forest Group can generate. Membership of the Forest Group is free and does not require a specific payment.

Context features

Landscape and climate: Atlantic climate. In Flanders, forest covers only about 11% of the total area. Forests are often originating from plantations on former heathlands and wet grasslands: pine and poplar plantations make up almost half of the forest area, while only 1/3 of the forest area consists of broadleaved stands of indigenous species (oak (*Quercus* spp.), beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.), mixed deciduous stands). Forests in Flanders are clearly part of an urbanized and industrialized region. In this context, forest goods and services are mainly related to socio-cultural and ecological services. This is comparable to regions like the Netherlands, parts of Denmark and southern UK.

Structure: More than half of the forest in Flanders is privately owned and ownership is spread over thousands of small properties. Average private properties are not larger than 1 ha. A majority of these private owners are not active forest managers.

LOCATION

Participation is for the whole of the Flemish Region (*Vlaams Gewest*, region of Belgium)

BELGIUM

Information/Contact: www.debosgroepen.be

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?



The Flemish Forest Group presents a successful contract solution. The Forest Groups have been delivering good results for more than 15 years. With more than 13.000 members who together have more than 35.000 hectares of forest under management, the respectful collective approach of the Forest Groups represents more than 1/3 of the private forest owners in Flanders. That number continues to rise year after year. More than 80% of this group manage a forest surface smaller than 5 ha and more than 60%, a surface smaller than 1 ha.

Reasons for success:

The Flemish Forest Group presents a successful contract solution. See Main Strengths under SWOT analysis.

SWOT analysis

Main Strengths

1. A Flemish Forest Group is a private association tailor made to the needs of forest owners and managers; forest owners and managers maintain control over their property
2. Contractual commitments for management plans and projects are made to a structure forest managers and owners can trust; this is important for a long-term implementation of objectives (integrated approach ecology, economy, education)
3. Free advice without engagement; neutral and independent approach; voluntary and easy membership. Reducing the elements that remove motivation (administration (for free), costs (reduced fees for collective sale of timber), paternalism of state management)

Main Weaknesses

1. Fragmentation of interests; common implementation is a constant challenge
2. Management plans and projects often depend on individual relationships; therefore continuity of implementation can be an issue
- 3: Ensuring a collective approach sustained by a sufficient and qualitative level of expertise for the long term is a challenge without direct funding from membership

Main Opportunities

1. Own management vision of forest owners and managers is respected
2. Official recognition by civil society
3. Stimulus to higher level of management quality. A sustainable implementation of multifunctional forest management at relative low cost

Main Threats

1. Legal uncertainty by reinterpretation or changes in chosen management objectives or application thereof, directly or indirectly effected by government
2. Dependance on public financing
3. Balance between economic and non-economic aspects of forest management need to remain of interest for forest managers and owners