

REPORT ON SURVEY RESULTS

SURVEY OF PRIVATE FOREST OWNERS ON THE CURRENT ORGANIZATION OF NATURE CONSERVATION, COMPENSATIONS FOR RESTRICTIONS ON FARMING ACTIVITIES AND MOTIVATION TO COLLABORATE MORE ACTIVELY IN PRESERVING BIOLOGICAL VALUES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sub-Action A.6.2: Survey on compensation mechanisms

The forest is an important ecosystem on the Earth where the dominant plant form in a relatively large area is trees of various ages, characteristic features include the undergrowth with shrubs, ground cover plants and forest animals, as well as the soil with its rich fauna, bacteria, algae and other small creatures. The forest is the regulator of natural processes. The forest also plays an important role in human life, both as a recreational resource (walks in the fresh air, in silence, landscape, etc.) and as an economic resource that renews itself over time (berries, mushrooms, firewood, timber, etc.).

Forests occupy more than half (51%) of the territory in Latvia. By ownership, 46% are state forests, while 54% are forests managed by private or legal entities. In recent years, we increasingly see clashes of different opinions in the public space about the natural environment and the forest sector. What the forest will be like in the future depends on the knowledge and actions of the forest owners. A common goal for the use of forest resources would be the sustainable management of forest ecosystems, not only for the production of timber, but also for the use of our forests for other essential ecosystem services that are important to our well-being.

In order to find out the experience of private forest owners in Latvia about the management of forests and preservation of natural values in forests, a survey was conducted according to a methodology developed by researchers in the period from July to December 2021, in which the opinions of 599 private forest owners were determined, of which 61% stated that the forests or forest parts they managed were located in a specially protected natural area (SPNA). The survey included questions about current practices in forest management, attitude towards the maintenance of natural values, limitations of economic activity, types of support in the preservation of natural values, including compensations, use of information sources, knowledge and involvement in the context of nature protection plans.

The majority (68%) of the respondents were men, 51% of the respondents were in the age group from 45 to 65 years. 66% of the respondents had a higher education, 30% of the respondents indicated that the obtained education was related to forestry. 89% of the respondents owned the forest as natural persons. According to forest areas, 39% of those surveyed owned forest areas of 5-20 ha, 27% - 21-50 ha. The majority (72%) of the respondents organized forestry activities by themselves by working in the forest. The respondents indicated that the most frequently performed activities in the forests were picking mushrooms and berries (69%), harvesting firewood (59%), taking care of young trees (59%), clearing felling (55%), the least frequent activity - habitat management (6%).

Regarding the greatest natural value in their properties, the forest owners indicated elements promoting natural diversity (dead wood, old hollow trees, trees of different ages and species) (43%), rare habitats (21%), rare species (20%) and giant trees (14%). On the other hand, 27% of the respondents believed that there were no special natural values in their forest properties. Evaluating their knowledge of how to manage the natural values in the forest, 40% of the forest owners believed that they had sufficient knowledge, 37%

admitted partial knowledge. The majority (72%) of the respondents believed that the forest owner should make sure of the specially protected natural values found in the forest before carrying out forestry activities.

The forest owners believed that the obligation to leave hollow, dead, decaying trees in the forest (68%), the prohibition of logging during bird nesting (67%) and the obligation to leave ecological trees in the felling were the most helpful management measures in achieving the goals of nature protection in the forest, but the least helpful – a complete ban on forestry activities (55%), a ban on main felling (48%). 53% of the respondents stated that they would be ready to allocate 0% of their own forest for the preservation of natural values (limited forestry activity) without receiving compensation for it, 24% - to allocate 10% of the forest (it had been repeatedly mentioned here that such part of the forest was not commercially usable). 48% of the respondents whose forest property was located in a SPNA stated that they knew about the existence of a nature protection plan, 26% admitted that they did not know whether a nature protection plan had been developed. Relatively ambiguous answers were received regarding the involvement of the forest owners in the creation of these plans: 29% of the forest owners answered that it was not important to get involved, 22% - did not know, 24% - would like to be involved in the public discussion of the nature protection plan.

The forest owners' survey data show that a considerable number of private forest owners would like to pay more attention to the preservation of natural values in their forests if advisory and financial support were available. The following most essential types of consultative support were mentioned: expert consultations in the forest (in site) (42%), the opportunity to receive informative materials on the web (34%), and thematic training (32%), the least effective – the expert advisory helpline. The respondents recognized the State Forestry Service and the Forest Consultation and Services Centre as the most reliable sources of information about both forest management and natural values in the forest. The following most important types of financial support were mentioned: compensation (increasing the amount of compensation, calculation of compensation according to the market price, open and honest communication, indexation of compensation every few years, etc.), financial support (for the purchase of equipment, inventory, seedlings and for infrastructure improvement), application of real estate tax incentives.

The opinion on compensations and support measures if the forest property has restrictions on forestry activities was studied in more detail. Of the surveyed forest land owners, 25% had received compensation in the last five years for restrictions on forestry activities, 8% had not applied for a compensation even though there were restrictions (the mentioned reasons: the small amount of compensation, the large amount of required documentation and the complexity of completing it, the forest area was too small, there was no information about such a possibility, or no nature plan had been prepared for the specific forest area). Of those forest owners who had received compensation, 80% were not satisfied with the amount of compensation, while 55% were satisfied with the application procedure. Of the three compensation approaches proposed in the survey for the future, 75% of the respondents indicated that they would support the approach that the compensation value is determined according to the unobtained financial benefit from the restriction on forestry activity. Assuming that the forest owners' forests contain natural values, the preservation of which requires strict restrictions on forestry activities, none of the proposed support measures for their protection were evaluated positively by the forest owners (negative answers were received from 35% to 48% of the respondents, depending on the proposed support measure). For example, land



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repurchase (the state buys the relevant forest property from the owner at the market price) was rejected by 60% of the respondents, the conclusion of a voluntary protection agreement for 20 years (planned annual compensation according to the current procedures) was rejected by 58% of the respondents. As a relatively possible option, 36% of the respondents indicated the exchange of the land for an equivalent property. These opinions indicate that the previous experience of the forest owners with restrictions on forestry activities and compensation offers has been negative, and therefore this issue should require more attention in the future.

