

Tree health in a mosaic of micro forest plots



Stef Kaiser meets an Austrian forest ranger who deals with almost as many people as trees.

Michael Schnetzer is a fourth-generation forester and farmer based in the mountainous area of Western Austria. His family own a small pig and dairy farm run in a traditional way following organic principles. His farm is a passion, more than a business, and he makes a living from his day job as a forester.

Michael is what might loosely be translated as a public sector district forest ranger. Employed by the *Land* (in UK this might be Scottish Forestry) he is specifically responsible for looking after privately owned forest plots, which make up for about 60% of the total forest area across the seven municipalities under his management.

The forest he manages is fragmented to extremes, with 1500 privately owned plots ranging in size from a mere 200m² to two hectares, owned by both local and absentee owners. Many owners have inherited a miniscule plot without being aware of it. A few larger private plots, the largest one extending to 1800 hectares, are owned by regional agricultural cooperatives.

To add another layer of complexity, the landscape under Michael's management is a mosaic of private micro plots intermixed with public plots, most of them slightly larger – thanks God. To make things even more interesting yet, the public forest plots are the responsibility of one of Michael's colleagues not himself. Although basic management requirements are shared across all plots, management objectives vary between public forest and among private microplots.

Apart from minimum obligations to keep the forest disease free, private owners can manage (or not manage) their land as they please – except in the case of land

designated as Protection Forest. The forest ranger has the pleasure to liaise with an army of – often unaware – forest owners in order to guarantee basic care of the forest. Michael's main task is to detect diseased trees and contact owners to arrange for felling and removal. Furthermore, he deals with the maintenance of plot border markings (a surprisingly substantial task considering the number of plot borders...) and advises private owners on arrangements for forest management and timber marketing. The minimum forest management service is financed by the Land and comes at no cost to the owner.

As part of his responsibility to ensure tree health, he works closely with the local gamekeepers, in-



forming them of any need to adjust culling intensity, if increased deer damage is becoming a concern.

When Michael detects a group of diseased trees as part of his monitoring, he has to figure out whom the small plot belongs to and where the lucky owner lives. When making contact, he might have to first brief them on the fact that they call a forest their own! He will then inform them that that there are, for example, four firs affected by spruce bark beetle that need taken out. The owner will be given 14 days to get the job done (or more during the winter months).

A few owners of larger plots (larger as in above one hectare...) may be members of the *Waldverband*, the collective of forest owners (see *Creating economies of scale*, FTN June 2017). The collective organises *ad hoc* removals and timber marketing for small owners, and members can also opt to lease their forest to the collective for a full management and marketing service. Members pay an annual membership fee and at the end of each year, they get a profit balance, depending on the costs and income from timber sales that their forest has accrued.

However, interestingly, a lot of owners in Michael's area opt to take care of the removal of the trees – and sale of the wood – themselves, rather than engaging a contractor or the *Waldverband*. In theory, anyone can get the trees felled and removed with a chainsaw. They'll either cut it on site into firewood or drag it out with winches or even horses. Most of these forest plots will not be under any sort of management, therefore *ad hoc* management is rather informal.

Absentee owners or those without the motivation to go into the forest themselves, will find a relative or other contact in the area to get it done. Some may informally ask Michael for recommendations of 'local guys' or contractors who are active in the area. It's a bit like



Microplots – each side of the track is a different plot, each of them covering not much more than the area visible in the photo.

Left: Michael showing bark from a diseased tree



getting a dangerous tree cut in the garden and asking around if there are any tree surgeons just working in the area.

In 2018, the region's forests suffered severe storm damages, followed by an intense episode of bark beetle infestation. At the time, large quantities of diseased wood had to be removed, but still, the forest services had to contact each individual owner first and ask them to organise the felling and removal of the infected trees. In that situation, most owners, although not members of the *Waldverband*, opted to get the organisation's foresters to include the trees on their plot in the collective timber removal and marketing work done and be invoiced for it afterwards. In the case of the bark beetle crisis, none of the owners had to bear any net expenses – the cost of tree removal was offset by the sale of timber where possible (through collective marketing campaign) and government subsidies for the removal of diseased timber.



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