

# FOREST MENTORING

## – peer support for forest ownership

*The general aim of the project is to increase the understanding of forest owner decision-making and to develop new services with companies. In April 2021, a forest mentorship event was organized to strengthen decision-making of new forest owners. Due to Covid19-situation, the event was organized online using Microsoft Teams. Seven new or unexperienced forest owners participated in the event together with six experienced forest owners (mentors) from local Forest Owner's Association (Etelä-Pohjanmaan Mettälliset ry.). Based on the feedback, participants felt that talking with the mentors was useful and they would like to meet with the mentors again in the future.*

Forest owner workshops were organized in the beginning of the project and there was a clear need for decision making support. According to the forest owners, there are a lot of service offers related to timber production, but it is difficult to evaluate which are good, neutral, bad or expensive. Thus, there is a demand for “neutral and simple forest services”. Different forest companies are providing nowadays also more and more forest management and support services, but quite many of the forest owners doubted their quality and even more their motives. Based on the workshops, a need for peer-to-peer learning, e.g. forest mentoring could be an effective learning method. There are experienced forest owners who could share their knowledge and experience for younger or beginner forest owners.

### Planning

When planning events, it is important to include people of all genders and ages and offer equal possibility for everyone to attend. The forest vocabulary could constitute an obstacle and is something that should be

minimized or avoided when planning the event.

The invitations for the mentorship event were sent to people who, according to Finnish Forest Centre's data, became forest owner during 2018-2020 and lived and/or owned forest properties in the region of southern and central Ostrobothnia. The invitations were sent by e-mail, even though then only the people whose e-mail address was in the register of Finnish Forest Centre were included. Seven unexperienced forest owners signed up for the event, some of them lived near to their forest properties, but some of them were distant forest owners.

During the two-hour online mentorship event, the participants were divided into two smaller groups, where mentors and fresh forest owners discussed. The discussion topics were provided for them to keep the conversation active. The unexperienced forest owners were encouraged to raise up the questions they had in mind regarding to forest ownership or other forest issues. The aim was to keep the interaction as easy and open as possible to lower the threshold to ask questions. The creation of an inclusive and permissive discussion atmosphere plays an important role in successful learning environment, but, of course, the possibilities are limited when organizing the event online.

After the event, the contact information of the mentors was delivered to all the participants and they were encouraged to continue the mentoring relationship.

## Conclusion

Based on the feedback received, all respondents, both mentors and fresh forest owners, were willing to participate in mentoring again. According to that, there could be a demand for forest mentoring. It could be used in activating new forest owners. Compared to traditional forest advisory services, mentoring offers an easy way to access and learn forest issues. In addition, the information shared by the mentors is based on their own experiences and observations, and there is no commercial purpose behind it, i.e., the information is neutral in that respect.

According to the feedback, some participants would like to participate in group mentoring in the future and hoped to meet online. Instead of that, some participants hoped for a face-to-face meeting with a forest mentor. Based on this, there would be a demand for different mentoring methods. For distant forest owners, online mentoring may be the easiest option. On the other hand, the feedback from new forest owners also raised the need to receive information from a mentor in matters related to their own forest properties and its management. In that case, a visit to their own forest property together with a mentor would be the best option.

It takes time to build a relationship of trust between mentor and fresh forest owner. The physical face-to-face meetings could allow better interaction between participants. Face-

to-face meeting is especially suitable for people who are used to traditional or personal teaching methods. In particular, a meeting in the forest enables a multi-sensory learning experience, which is not possible in an online environment.

A group meeting like the one in this pilot would certainly serve as a kick-off event and an opportunity to people to become familiar with mentoring. It could be arranged either online or face-to-face in the woods. Mentoring is usually based on a confidential and open relationship that can take more time to develop. It is also influenced by the values, ideologies and objectives of forest owners. Therefore, more time and more meetings are required to form the actual mentoring relationship, although during a meeting, the new forest owner can already get information and answers to their questions.

Not only the new forest owners, but also the mentors can learn through mentoring. It can help them to justify and, on the other hand, question their own opinions and views on forest management. In this way, mentors can strengthen their own knowledge or learn new ideas from fresh forest owners. Forest owners' associations such as the *Mettälliset ry.* could benefit from providing a mentoring service and possibly gain new members through mentoring. In the forest owners' associations, members usually act voluntarily and are involved because of their own hobbies and interests.

# PILOT SUMMARY



EUROPEAN UNION

**Interreg**  
**Botnia-Atlantica**

European Regional Development Fund



**Prosperous forest**

Diversification through Inclusion and Specialisation