

FOREST GROUPS AS SUPPORT TO PRIVATE FOREST OWNERS IN DEVELOPING CLOSE-TO-NATURE MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

There is a political and societal demand for close-to-nature forest management. Publicly as well as privately owned forests should be submitted to a close-to-nature management especially in densely populated and sparsely afforested regions. Traditional policy instruments do not achieve this objective sufficiently and therefore the potential of a new policy instrument, namely the *forest group*, was tested in implementing close-to-nature practices as part of multifunctional forest management. Data from three types of interviews were used: 95 expert interviews, 404 individual NIPF owners' interviews and 11 NIPF owners' focus groups.

It was found that stimulating close-to-nature management in private forests is more fruitful in a forest group than it would be outside the forest group. However, owners participating in a forest group still experience practical difficulties in implementing close-to-nature management practices. To trigger a change in forest management, the forest groups should identify and focus on the practical difficulties that NIPF owners' experience. A forest group could, at least in part, remove these difficulties by means of: (1) personal contact between the coordinator of the forest group and the forest owners; (2) a periodical magazine providing information on technical, financial and legal aspects; (3) time-extensive practical based education and (4) establishing local pilot-forests, managed by the Forest Service or conservation groups. All communications about close-to-nature management with the participants of a forest group should include economic as well as ecological and recreational aspects.

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