

FARMERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF HIGH VALUE TREE AGROFORESTRY SYSTEMS

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Agroforestry is the practice of deliberately integrating woody vegetation (trees or shrubs) with crops and/or animal systems to benefit from the resulting ecological and economic interactions. Existing research indicates that appropriate application of agroforestry principles and practices is a key mean by which the European Union might achieve more sustainable methods of food and fibre production whilst producing both profits for farmers and environmental benefits for society. The AGFORWARD research project (January 2014-December 2017), funded by the European Commission, is promoting agroforestry practices in Europe that will advance sustainable rural development.

Within the framework of AGFORWARD ten stakeholders groups were created across different countries in Europe to promote agroforestry involving high value trees including fruit trees (e.g. olive, walnut, chestnut, apple, orange), and trees grown for high value timber (e.g. walnut and wild cherry). Stakeholders groups held national meetings between May and November 2014 to identify the main opportunities and challenges faced by this type of agroforestry in their farms. Although ecological and socio-economic contexts varied among sites, some common themes emerged. This paper describes both the positive and negative aspects of high value tree agroforestry systems identified by stakeholders under the headings of: i) production, ii) management, iii) the environment, and iv) socio-economic issues. Positive aspects included production benefits such as the capacity to produce tree products whilst at the same time improving animal health and welfare. The attraction of developing an interesting and original system was seen as a key management benefit. Environmental benefits included enhanced biodiversity and soil conservation, and socio-economic benefits included improvement to public perception of farmers and a diversification of income streams. Negative aspects from a production perspective included loss by predation. Complexity of work was seen as a key constraint from a management perspective, and administrative burdens and lack of economic benefit were seen as potential socio-economic drawbacks.

In summary, integrating animals and crops with high value trees were seen to offer production and environmental benefits, but the capacity to achieve these gains is likely to be constrained by perceived administrative and management complexity as well as socio-economic concerns. In the next stage of the project, each group is undertaking research and development work, including field trials, to identify ways in which to maximize the benefits of agroforestry whilst at the same reducing potential constraints.

Keywords: timber trees, fruit trees, stakeholders, economic benefits, social benefits

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