



Interim assessment of the METSO Forest Biodiversity Programme for Southern Finland – English summary

Background

The Forest Biodiversity Programme for Southern Finland METSO 2008–2016 aims to halt the decline of the degradation of forest habitats and species, and stabilise a favourable trend in the development of the biological diversity of forest ecosystems in Southern Finland. The METSO Programme targets both state-owned and private lands. As over 75 % of forests are privately owned in the southern parts of the country where the need for biodiversity conservation is the most acute, the funds of the METSO-programme are mainly channelled to private forests owners, forest companies, municipalities and congregations.

The METSO Programme represents a departure from centralised governing of nature conservation to an emphasis on voluntary conservation contracts between the forest owners and authorities. The aim is to avoid conflicts between landowners and nature conservation authorities, and advance the appreciation and conservation of forest characteristics that are valuable for biodiversity.

The wide-ranging Programme includes 14 action points, the most fundamental of which aim to enhance Southern Finland's network of protected areas, and safeguard forest biodiversity in privately-owned forests across the region. These two action points aim to protect over 200 000 hectares of ecologically valuable forests by establishing permanent conservation areas and making fixed-term (10 to 20 years) conservation contracts with land-owners. Reaching this target would double the conservation area in Southern Finland. A set of ecological criteria has been defined to facilitate the selection of ecologically valuable forest sites to be included in the Programme. The protection of the valuable sites is targeted cost-effectively and with attention to social acceptance. Public funds totalling around 180 million euros have been allocated to the implementation of the Programme over the period 2008–2012. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of the Environment are jointly responsible for the implementation of the Programme.

The Finnish Environment Institute and the Finnish Forest Research Institute have evaluated the first two years of the METSO Programme. The focus of this interim assessment is on the efforts of the Programme to enhance the flexible administration of forest biodiversity conservation. The Programme represents a conceptual change from top-down administrative practices in the field of nature conservation; stakeholders working in both forestry and nature conservation have actively participated in shaping its contents.

Assessment methods

The material for the interim assessment was compiled in collaboration with the Monitoring Group of the Programme. In addition to review documents received from various parties

responsible for implementing the action points of the Programme, an internet questionnaire was circulated among representatives of administration and stakeholders working at regional and local levels. The questionnaire allowed all respondents to describe their own experiences of the work on the METSO Programme and the likely impacts.

Improved collaboration

The questionnaire responses indicated that the programme has effectively and positively reshaped the relationship between the key organisations involved in forest management and conservation. The respondents felt that collaboration had improved, and that they had themselves learnt through this enhanced cooperation. Better cooperation between the forestry organisations and nature conservation organisations was considered to advance a successful implementation of the programme. However, the increased dialogue and collaboration was also considered to add to the workload and consume significant amounts of time and resources.

Newly protected areas

During the years 2008-2009 the METSO Programme has yielded 13,661 hectares of strictly protected area. This includes former commercially managed forests owned by the state and areas offered for protection voluntarily by landowners. During this period, another of 18,900 hectares have been conserved in privately-owned forests with other policy instruments. These include the financing of sustainable forestry, nature management of commercially managed forests, and environmental subsidy. For the application of these instruments to reach the targets of the Programme by the year 2009, the annual funding allocation should be tripled from 2012 onwards.

Habitat restoration and research

The restoration and active management of ecologically valuable forest habitats within protected areas is another important way to help safeguard forest biodiversity in Southern Finland. During the period 2008–2009 Metsähallitus Natural Heritage Services has purposefully managed and restored 6,400 hectares of forest habitat in protected areas. Ecological inventories of protected areas have additionally continued, covering 18,000 ha over the two-year period. In connection with these inventories the need for future habitat restoration and forest nature management is assessed, to support ecologically effective targeting of these activities in the future.

Wide-ranging research supporting the METSO Programme has also been funded over the last two years. The Ministries finance applied and basic research with approximately 2 million euros per each year during the METSO Programme.

Reaching landowners

The METSO Programme has applied a forest-owner-centred approach. Despite this general focus, the efforts to encourage the participation of forest-owners have not been very active during this early phase of the Programme implementation. The questionnaire responses indicated that the landowners' opinions were appreciated. However, mainly those forest-owners who are generally active had participated the Programme.

A new website has been opened for the programme in April 2009 at www.metsonpolku.fi. This site also provides material in English.

Key challenges

The assessment highlighted four critical issues related to the METSO Programme that must be addressed during the further implementation of the Programme:

1 Increased engagement: In order to achieve the aims of the METSO Programme, greater efforts are urgently needed. Active steps need to be taken particularly to make new groups of landowners aware of the Programme, possibly also exploiting media that have not yet been widely utilised. Nature management and planning of commercially managed forests should be promoted more widely.

2 Need for a comprehensive and coherent network: The programme has to operate in conditions in Southern Finland where the spatial connectivity of forests available for conservation is a challenge. There are plenty of distinct sites worth protecting, but developing a network of protected sites that is truly comprehensive will need special attention and implies a new approach to nature conservation. Action should be taken on sites located between existing protected areas.

3 Ensuring the best use of scarce financial resources: It is not yet clear whether the METSO Programme will ultimately prove to be cost-effective. Both the conservation outputs and the financial resources must be monitored. Informed targeting of resources as well as comparison and competition should be used when allocating public funds to forest biodiversity conservation on a voluntary basis. Increased resources are required for reaching the Programme targets.

4 Advancing policy-integration: It is important to recognize the linkages between the METSO Programme and other policies and planning processes related to conservation, forestry and environmental issues. In the context of climate change, for instance, there is pressure to use forests more intensively but it remains important to safeguard forest biodiversity in connection with developing these new forest management schemes. New and innovative instruments will need to be considered for these types of integration challenges.

Further information on the interim assessment:

Kimmo Syrjänen, Project Manager, Finnish Environment Institute
tel. +358 40 5835 747, kimmo.syrjanen@ymparisto.fi
Riikka Paloniemi, Senior Researcher, Finnish Environment Institute
tel. + 358 40 7017250, riikka.paloniemi@ymparisto.fi

On the programme:

Marjukka Mähönen, Senior Environment Adviser, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
tel. +358 (0)9 160 54626, marjukka.mahonen@mmm.fi
Saara Lilja-Rothsten, Senior Adviser, Ministry of the Environment
tel. +358 40 197 6394, saara.lilja-rothsten@ymparisto.fi