

# INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF POPLAR CULTURE

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## REPORT FROM BELGIUM

*Marijke Steenackers<sup>1</sup>, Jos Van Slycken<sup>1</sup>, Vic Steenackers<sup>2</sup>, Boudewijn Michiels<sup>1</sup>*

### I. Poplar plantations in Belgium

#### • surface of poplar plantations (ha) and annual harvest (m<sup>3</sup>)

From a national inventory carried out in 2001 it appeared that the area of poplar plantations in Belgium amounts to 35,000 ha.

These plantations yield a mean annual timber production of 537,000 m<sup>3</sup>, of which 370,000 m<sup>3</sup> is log wood and 167,000 m<sup>3</sup> branch wood.

#### • surface or natural stands (ha) and annual harvest (m<sup>3</sup>)

Natural poplar stands no longer occur in Belgium. As regards Black poplar (*Populus nigra*), recent studies carried out at the IBW revealed that this species is represented by no more than 21 different genotypes.

#### • annual consumption by local industries

In Belgium 550,000 m<sup>3</sup> of poplar timber is processed each year by local industries. More than half (59 %) of it originates from the national lumber market, whereas the remaining 41 % is imported from the neighbouring countries France, Germany and the Netherlands.

Pulp and paper are by far the main end products into which poplar timber is converted.

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Forestry and Game Management, Garverstraat 4, 9500 Geraardsbergen (Belgium)

Tel: 32 54 43 71 11 – 32 54 43 61 60 – e-mail [Marijke.Steenackers@lin.vlaanderen.be](mailto:Marijke.Steenackers@lin.vlaanderen.be)

<sup>2</sup> Garverstraat 4, 9500 Geraardsbergen (Belgium) Tel: 32 54 41 48 95 – 32 54 42 15 03

ANNUAL CONSUMPTION : 555,000 m <sup>3</sup>	
Veneer (plywood, crates, ...)	14 %
Sawn wood (pallet board, crates)	34 %
Pulp (paper, cardboard)	43 %
Others (firewood,....)	9 %

• **annual imports (round wood)**

Each year Belgium imports 228,000 m<sup>3</sup> of round wood from France, Germany and the Netherlands.

This timber is processed by the veneer, sawn wood, paper and chipboard industries.

IMPORT OF POPLAR WOOD				
IN TOTAL : 228,000 m <sup>3</sup>				
	m <sup>3</sup>	The Netherlands	France	Germany
veneer	10,600	91 %	7 %	2 %
sawn wood	40,600	48 %	1 %	51 %
paper	160,000	18 %	67 %	16 %
chipboard	17,000	100 %	0 %	0 %

• **annual exports (round wood)**

The annual export of poplar timber to France, Italy, the Netherlands and North Africa amounts to 209,000 m<sup>3</sup>.

EXPORT OF POPLAR WOOD	
IN TOTAL : 209,000 m <sup>3</sup>	
France	35-43 %
Italy	15-25 %
The Netherlands	10-17 %
North Africa	8-25 %

The proportion between import and export indicates a nett annual import of poplar timber in Belgium of about 20,000 m<sup>3</sup>, not only indicating that all poplars growing in Belgium should be processed by the national industries but also that they are essential for the industries relying on it.

These enterprises, especially the veneer and sawn wood industries are highly dependent on poplar timber as a raw material, whereas other sectors such as the pulp, paper and plywood industry can rely on several feedstocks.

At present, poplar industries dread a local shortage of round wood in the near future. This feeling of uncertainty is pertinent as an inquiry revealed that one out of three poplar planters fears for an increase of the rust attacks and for an unfavourable legislation concerning the establishment of new plantings. Consequently, these growers seriously consider stopping planting poplar.

In the short term an increasing import from France, Germany and the Netherlands is to be expected. This trend will entail a negative impact on the life cycle of poplar products as recent studies have demonstrated that the use of poplar as a raw material becomes uneconomic whenever it is transported over distances exceeding 150 km.

## **II. Suggestion or priorities on:**

### **A. the Common Agricultural Policy or the EU**

One has to consider if forestry, and in particular plantation forestry (e.g. poplar plantations) is in its right place under the umbrella of agriculture. The establishment of a new EU-Constitution offers the opportunity to include Forestry as a separate field of policy, thus opening perspectives for the creation of a legal basis for the imperative co-ordination of forest-relevant activities and thus far the development of a specific policy on EU level for forests, forestry, forest protection, timber production and wood processing.

The effect of the CAP on the afforestation of agricultural land with poplars strongly differs between member states as a result of the incoherent subsidizing policy. In some countries, among which Belgium (Flanders), grants for afforestation of farmland have little or no success. Failure of this initiative urges for the identification of its causes and for the outlining of measures to be undertaken. The critical success factors have to be assessed in order to adjust these measures.

A decreasing interest is stated in several member states to support planting of fast growing tree species. Main reasons are the negative image of fast growing trees used for wood production (exotic species) and plantation forests, which are considered as non sustainable managed forests. Also the (in many cases non scientifically proven) negative impact on the environment of such plantations is another reason.

Therefore the E. U. should support actions to improve the image of plantation forestry (e.g. the need for own wood production, environmental benefits of plantation forestry, L.C.A. of poplar wood products compared to plastics, biodiversity, ...) and create public awareness for this kind of forests.

Every member state has or is developing its own criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management. Questions arise sometimes if plantation forestry can be considered as SFM. Common guidelines for sustainable management of plantation forest should be developed.

More and more restrictions on land use are also directed by the E.U. (e.g. Natura 2000). There should be more communication and integration of the different policy fields within the E. U.

As poplar culture is mainly a clonal culture, clonal diversity is critical. Actually a lack of valuable clones exists. The actual European poplar culture is based nearly exclusively on the use of poplar clones selected by merely two European public research institutes, *viz.* the *Istituto di sperimentazione per la pioppicoltura* in Italy and the *Instituut voor Bosbouw en Wildbeheer* in Belgium. Moreover a decreasing support by the member states for selection and breeding work is noticed. The Flemish authorities ever more question the continued unilateral funding of the ongoing selection and breeding programme which benefits the overall European poplar culture. Here also support on the E. U. level is highly recommended. This support should also include the maintenance, renewal of the genebanks, the breeding work itself and the evaluation of the new clonal material. This support should have a long term aspect. (e.g. where have the IRPI data base and the PFF -database gone?) In addition, an international trend to scale down the funding of classical breeding programmes in favour of molecular research is observed.

As the European breeding programmes are based on the natural poplar populations in North America and in Europe, the international collaboration between the EU member states as well as between the EU and North America should be enhanced, focusing on the *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation and on the exchange of basic material (seeds, pollen).

### **B. Actions to accelerate the integration of Eastern European countries into the EU**

The expansion of the EU towards Eastern Europe will implicate an increase of the EU forest area with 25 % and a rise of the number of forest owners with 3 million. Consequently, the EU will be able to meet 95 % of it's own needs for wood and wood products. Poplar, being a fast growing tree species, will continue to play a key role in the wood production within the new Europe.

- Possible actions to accelerate the integration of Eastern European countries:
- Investment in setting up of young foresters
- Training of young foresters in poplar culture combined with technical assistance
- Diversification of agricultural activities towards poplar culture and training of farmers in afforestation of agricultural land
- Development and improvement of infrastructure connected with the development of forestry
- Stimulation of more southern countries in Eastern Europe, such as Hungary, Roumania and Bulgaria, to develop again their own breeding and selection programmes instead of relying on the import of West European poplar clones.
- Investment in the creation of a virtual Poplar Breeding Centre which should become a major communication centre for poplar breeders and geneticists across Europe. The main aim of this centre could be to centralise and distribute all relevant information directly or indirectly related to the improvement, genetics and breeding of poplar and to be an educational and training centre for breeding and genetics for Eastern European breeders
- Stimulation of networking at the different levels of the wood chain, etc. therefore existing programmes such as INCO, EUREKA should be promoted or improved and there access should be facilitated for the Eastern European countries.
- Develop guidelines to protect genetic resources (natural populations) of poplar (often the corner stone of breeding programmes)

### **C. Improvement or international cooperation with developing: countries**

The International Poplar Commission, established in 1947, is governed by a Convention that places it within the framework of FAO. Any FAO member nation may join the IPC when it formally accepts the Convention. The right of admission has also been extended to countries that are not members of FAO but are members of the United Nations, any of its Specialized Agencies or the International Atomic Energy Agency, if they formally accept the convention. In 2003, 36 countries from the different continents are member of IPC.

The functions of the IPC are:

- (a) to study the scientific, technical, social and economic aspects of poplar and willow cultivation, and of the use of their wood;
- (b) to promote the exchange of ideas and materials between research workers, producers and users;
- (c) to arrange joint research programmes;
- (d) to stimulate the organization of meetings combined with study tours
- (e) to report and make recommendations to the FAO Conference, through the Director-General of FAO;
- (f) to make recommendations to National Poplar Commissions, through the Director-General of FAO and the governments concerned.

IPC, with more than 50 years of experience in international cooperation, is the ideal organisation to further develop such a non-stop programme with developing countries.

So far, the cooperation is mainly based on the financial contribution of the different member countries of IPC. Extra financial support by the EU will therefore be most welcome to further develop the worldwide IPC activities.

EU could also stimulate participation of developing countries to international programmes such as IPGRI, EUFORGEN.

### **D. Other matters related to poplar/willow culture**

The decreasing interest for poplar growing in Belgium, as is apparent from the reduction of the number of young plantations, is due to several reasons:

- Decreasing interest of policy makers for the economic function of forests whereas a dominant importance is attached to the ecological and social (i.e. recreational) role.
- As a growing number of poplar sites become property of nature conservation SME's, the area available for wood production will decrease in the near future.
- Poplars and plantation forests have a negative image due to their alleged negative impact on environment and biodiversity.
- No real incentives exist for farmers to plant poplars (low level of subsidies, legal uncertainty, high pressure on agricultural land for infrastructure, industry, housing, ...)

A decreasing interest for poplar culture is observed in several EU member states. This trend can be veered by the EU through:

- Emphasizing the importance of national wood production in the global context by facts and figures
- Increase public awareness on plantation forestry and national wood production
- Scientific research on the effects of plantation forestry on environment and biodiversity together with the development management guidelines to weaken possible negative effects
- Improve the legal status of temporary forests on agricultural land Subsidies ensuring an income comparable to agricultural crops, based on rentability studies (on the farm level)
- Emphasize the importance of poplar timber as a renewable and environment-friendly and ecologically sound product
- Delineation of target areas (based on soil productivity, existing or developing markets, environmental buffering, existing ecological values...)

Only too often the danger of spreading diseases through exchange of plant material (cuttings, setts, plants) between countries or continents is minimized or even ignored. However, the transmission of diseases is the main cause of the ever increasing world-wide problems in poplar culture. The expansion of the EU towards Eastern Europe might aggravate this phenomenon. Therefore, a uniform and effective quarantine regulation should be issued by the EU in order to prevent disastrous spread of insects as well as pathogenic fungi and bacteria.

Aspen breeding and selection programmes, already initiated during the second world war and continued for some years afterwards, can be of importance especially for the Baltic States and other new member States of the EU, i.f. Poland.