

EDITORIAL

HOW IS THE LEASED FORESTLAND USED?

The Law on Changes and Amendments to the Forest Act (Official Gazette 68/18, 115/18, 98/19, 32/20 and 145/20) has been announced. There are several issues to be resolved by the changes and amendments, but here we focus only on the part that concerns the use of leased forestland in state ownership. The lease of forestland is conducted pursuant to the regulations on the lease of forestland owned by the Republic of Croatia (Official Gazette 55/19). Special revisions of the amendments to the Forest Planning Regulation (Official Gazette 31/20) allow for the use of non-wood forest products (mainly grazing) even in areas previously banned for grazing by forest management plans. Almost two thousand contracts have so far been concluded on short-term and long-term lease of about 55 thousand ha of forestland. The majority of the contracts relates to grazing. With this method of forest land usage, the Republic of Croatia, as the owner of the land, wants to achieve several strategic goals, such as retaining the population in rural and karst areas, increasing the security of food supply, ensuring economic sustainability in the livestock sector, protecting biological diversity, preserving the landscape and others. The public forest owner who manages forestland acquires additional income, but also encounters hitherto unknown problems in business. It is still not fully defined whether and how the lessee may fence the area he uses for grazing purposes. The Management Board of the company Croatian Forests has issued an Instruction on the conditions for installing an electric fence on a leased property, but it is not yet in use in the field. Installing electric fences causes major problems in the field because the wires are also placed across forest roads, which hinders traffic of the vehicles of Croatian Forests. Even worse, fire engines have no free passage in the event of fire, which is not a rare occurrence in spring and summer months. Wires placed over living trees damage them. On surfaces next to leased areas trees become damaged and bark is peeled off by horses, probably due to insufficient food. Such trees will eventually die. Forest offices calculate forest damage, but this does not solve the problem. The only solution is to terminate contracts with such lessees. Very little attention is paid to the control of leased forestland. Grass-

land vegetation in parts of these areas is often completely destroyed due to excessive numbers of livestock in a small area. These areas provide water, food and night shelter to cattle. It will take a long time for such areas to revert to their original state; however, karst areas will never recover. The Regulation stipulates that a lease may be obtained if the lessee has less than 3.3 ha per head of cattle, which means that the optimal area per cattle is 3.3 ha, but this happens very rarely. The problem is that there are many more cattle over 3.3 ha than necessary, which destroys the used surface. It should also be stressed that fires breaking out in agricultural areas in spring, and less in summer months, spread to forests. Fires almost always affect surfaces leased for the purpose of grazing. None of the lessees participates actively in extinguishing fires or in any way protects the leased area from fires. All this raises a suspicion that the grass in leased areas is burned on purpose because these areas are not used in accordance with the contract, or in other words, they are not used for cattle grazing but solely for the purpose of receiving financial incentives. It is up to the Agency for Incentives in Agriculture, Fishery and Rural Development to control the areas for which incentives are being paid.

Mountaineers, hikers and other visitors to areas such as nature parks often report threats of attacks by cattle and dogs that roam freely over both leased and unleased surfaces. There have been cases of attacks on mountain trails with severe consequences.

Since time immemorial cattle has grazed in forests and forest meadows, but always under surveillance, which prevented the occurrence of these and similar problems. Implementing better control in the field by the Agency for Incentives in Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development and imposing sanctions on users would improve the situation in the field. It has also been observed that the livestock in certain areas is in a rather bad condition due to droughts and thirst in the summer and cold and lack of food in the winter. This calls for more intensive involvement of animal protection associations.

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