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From constrain to opportunity: win-win public-private partnership for financing sustainable poplar plantations and biodiversity conservation in Lombardy (northern Italy)

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Abstract

Financing the creation and maintenance of biodiversity conservation areas is a major challenge in times of constraints in public spending. In this context, Payment for Ecosystem Services are considered innovative and effective market approaches to conservation finance.

We analyzed the objectives, the contents of the negotiated agreement, and the main outcomes of a Payment for Biodiversity Conservation Scheme (ECOPAY Connect) in the Lombardy Region in northern Italy, which brings together Regional Park authorities, timber industry, and private poplar growers as partners involved in complying with the requirements connected to an FSC® (Forest Stewardship Council) certification initiative. This scheme represents a win-win solution and transforms a certification compliance requirement, i.e. the set-aside of the 10% of the productive area for ecological restoration, into an opportunity, where a public-private partnership led to reduction of costs for both partners, and more functional restoration interventions within the park. The scheme now runs by its own, making ECOPAY Connect one of the few functioning PES schemes in Italy and in EU. The scheme was launched with a grant from the Bank Foundation and this partnership is now used as a best practice in many EU projects such as Gestire 2020, an integrated LIFE project by Lombardy Region, and Sincere, a Horizon 2020 project.