

6.1 Forest owners

■ 73% of the Swiss forest is publicly owned; 27% is in private hands.

■ There are almost a quarter of a million private forest owners in Switzerland. Each of them owns, on average, 1.3 hectares of forest, which is approximately the size of two football fields.

■ Increasing co-operation and improving management methods can make the enterprises more efficient.

Fragmentation into small lots

According to Swiss law, the forest is freely accessible to everyone. Unlike in many other countries, in Switzerland you will find no signs forbidding entry to the forest. Many people, therefore, do not realise that every piece of forest in the country belongs to someone.

But who are these forest owners? Three quarters (73%) of Switzerland's forest is in public hands, but there are large regional differences. In several central and Pre-Alpine cantons more than half of the forests are privately owned, and there are almost 3000 private owners in Switzerland. The federal government owns less than one per cent and all the cantons together only own 5% of the Swiss forest. In comparison, the local governments own large areas of forest: the local municipal councils 29%, and the local citizens' associations 28%. A further 10% of forest land is in the hands of corporations and co-operative societies.

In many places the Swiss forest is divided up into very small lots. A public forest owner possesses, on average, only 300 hectares of forest. In fact, more than half the public owners own less than 100 hectares. Private forests are divided up into even smaller units. Each of the almost 250000 private forest owners has an average of only 1.3 hectares of forest. This is an area corresponding in size to about two football fields. But even these extremely small plots are not always in one place but are further divided up into lots located in different places.

This extreme fragmentation makes efficient commercial use difficult. Owners of small forest plots find it too expensive to manage their own forestry business. For financial reasons many forest owners have got together to form larger economic units or

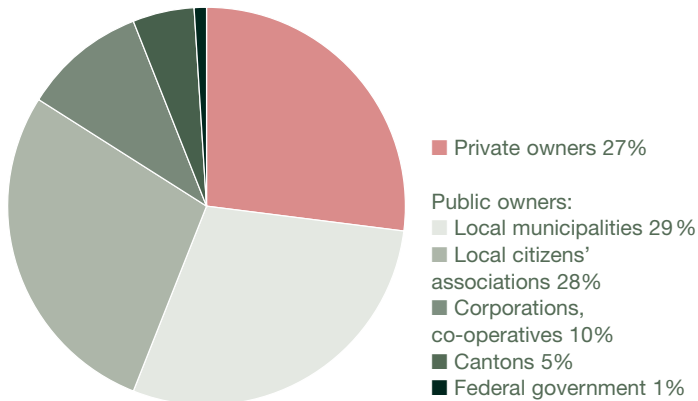
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businesses in recent years. There has been hardly any change lately in the number of forest owners, but the number of forest enterprises has been declining continually. This development is likely to accelerate in the foreseeable future.

6.1.1 Who owns the Swiss forest?

Forest owners and how they share the Swiss forest.



6.1.2 Lot partition

This extract from the Land Register shows how fragmented forest ownership is.



Management

Modern private forest enterprises have the know-how and the equipment to use timber efficiently. Forest enterprises are increasingly contracting out various jobs in their forests to other companies. These specialised companies often own the most technologically advanced timber harvesting machines, which they can use to full capacity by doing the timber harvesting work for several forest enterprises. The so-called “full harvesters” can fell, trim and de-bark the trees quicker and cheaper than any forest workers. But it is not economically viable for each forest enterprise to buy its own machines.

In order to improve their chances of survival, several forest enterprises have found new sources of income by taking on contract work in areas outside the forest. For instance, they offer services, such as managing the local government’s building and construction office.

The federal forestry policies are aimed at supporting efficient structures in the forest economy, for example, by assisting co-operation between forest owners and larger economic units incorporating several enterprises. The forest owners are expected to take responsibility, show initiative and take advantage of the full range of opportunities available. The goal is to improve the economic performance of the forest economy.

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