

## Knowledge Transfer in the Chestnut Coppice Industry –

### A Comparison of the Situation in Southeast England with Regions in Italy

#### **Background to Report**

In June 2014, I visited Tuscany, Piedmont and Friuli-Venezia-Giulia regions to explore the ways in which technical knowledge and experience were transferred within the coppice forestry industry. Although the original intention was to focus on just chestnut coppice workers in the Tuscany region and compare these to workers in Kent, the opportunity was taken to also visit other regions in Northern Italy where some coppice but mostly plantation forestry are practiced on a large scale. This enabled a wider view of the training programmes available and highlighted the strong influence of the regional as opposed to national government in forestry management.

I focused on making comparisons between the UK and the regions of Italy visited on the following topics:

- How and by whom are the training needs of coppice workers decided
- Methods and standards of training
- Health and safety issues
- Motor manual and mechanical harvesting of coppice

#### **Summary**

There are several differences in the way in which the UK and Italy have approached the task of up-skilling their respective forestry workforces whilst attempting to reduce the number of accidents in the industry. The resulting impact on coppice workers, generally engaged in motor manual felling, also appears to have been somewhat different in the 2 countries.

In short, Italian strategies have been decided on a regional basis and have attempted to support the coppice forestry industry by mostly offering training to new-comers whilst employing a policy of 'grandfather rights' and quick courses to existing workers with more than 2 years of experience. Competency is assumed among those with experience. By contrast, delivery of training in the UK is implemented according to national standards and since all have to 'jump the same hurdles' in order to achieve the standards to gain certification, effectively little distinction is made in practice between experienced and inexperienced operators. Both countries seem to employ a top down approach to deciding on training needs, a national system in the UK, but regionally based systems in Italy.

Because of the high frequency of sloping terrain on Italian forest sites, the use of tractor and tower winches is often integrated into the standard courses aimed at awarding contractors the permit to work as professional foresters on public land. In the UK it would be hard to find such an integrated course, especially one lasting just a few days, even one aimed at experienced contractors.

The distinctive training needs of coppice workers have not been well recognised in either country and the assumption seems to be that they require the same training as those engaged in mainstream forestry. As a result there is a shortage of specialised training opportunities to learn how to fell in coppice (one example came to light in Tuscany and only one is known in the UK which is in Southeast England) and the norm is to train coppice workers along with other chainsaw users in plantation situations.

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It seems therefore that in both countries, workers most often learn to fell coppice 'on the job' and are possibly at their most vulnerable to accidents and definitely most likely to give up during these first few months/years. There is clearly a challenge here to better train and prepare new workers for the difficult and complicated coppice environment.

It is hard to compare health and safety standards in forestry in the 2 countries as although information on accidents is recorded in both the UK and Italy, it is only as part of the overall agricultural statistics. Also, there is an inevitable variation between countries in the collection and recording of information. However, some useful work has been recently published by William Robb & Jonathan Cocking (May 2014): Review of European chainsaw fatalities, accidents and trends, and this may help to guide us in making further comparisons within Europe as part of Group 3 projects within the COST programme.

A constant trend is that the reporting of accidents in the private sector seems to be low compared to the public sectors in both countries, as situation apparently also mirrored elsewhere in Europe.

The issue of motor manual versus mechanical felling in coppice was explored. Indications are that mechanical harvesting of coppice is more common in Tuscany than in the southeast of England. It is unclear why this is, but factors might include the rather stronger markets for chips and woodfuel in Tuscany, and production of these lend themselves well to mechanisation.

From conversations with contractors both in the UK and Tuscany, when harvesters are used in coppice, there is usually a motor manual element included, either pre felling to facilitate mechanical processing or post felling to clean stools. Generally, in the UK, the higher the quality requirements, the less likely that mechanical felling or even processing will be appropriate. With the steeply sloping sites comprising much of the Italian coppice forest resource, it is hard to see an alternative to motor manual felling where machinery cannot gain access. Resistance of coppice to mechanisation means that manual felling is likely to continue to be the major risk in coppice harvesting.

Again this places a great onus on the industry to ensure that truly appropriate training is made available to coppice workers, who are still potentially at relatively high risk.

#### **Written References:**

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Review of European chainsaw fatalities, accidents and trends  
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[http://www.lantra-awards.co.uk/Downloads/Training-and-Qualifications/Forest-and-Arboriculture-\(no-prices\).aspx](http://www.lantra-awards.co.uk/Downloads/Training-and-Qualifications/Forest-and-Arboriculture-(no-prices).aspx)

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