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SMALL FOREST PROPERTIES AND ASSOCIATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY IN SEGOVIA, SPAIN

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Small-scale forest ownership is one of the main structural barriers to sustainable forest management in large rural areas of Europe. In Spain, the high fragmentation of private forest ownership, combined with depopulation and aging, has led to the abandonment of forests and the loss of social, economic, and cultural ties between local populations and their forest environments. Small properties scattered throughout the territory make proper sustainable management unfeasible. In this context, initiatives to form associations among small landowners are emerging as a key strategy for overcoming the limitations of smallholdings, although their development presents significant challenges.

This study analyzes the barriers and motivations for associationism in the context of extreme small-scale forestry, paying special attention to the ways in which senses of private property are configured and how these influence motivations for collective action. Qualitative research was conducted through a case study focused on the Segovia Forestry Association (Castile and Leon, Spain). Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with forest owners and social agents, as well as a focus group with small landowners. The analysis was carried out using thematic content analysis.

The results show that, although associationism is widely recognized as a potential solution to the problems arising from smallholdings, its viability is conditioned by complex sociocultural factors. Three main meanings of forest ownership are identified—family legacy, individual right, and community responsibility—which interact ambivalently with collaborative practices and collective management. The tensions between these ways of conceiving ownership, together with the disengagement of many owners and the lack of a tradition of association, limit the scope for collective action and compromise the sustainability of rural areas.

Palavras-chave: forest abandonment; small forest owners; associationism; rural depopulation; sustainable forest management.