

Booklet 08

**Transmission of Electricity
Management of Vegetation
in Forest Corridors**

Local partnerships



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Introduction

This booklet was written by the staff of LIFE Elia-RTE (2011-2017), a project financed by the LIFE programme of the European Union, by the Walloon government, by Elia and RTE, the latter two electricity Transmission System Operators (TSO) in Belgium and France, respectively.

The main goal of the project is the transformation of forest easements of high-voltage transmission line routes into ecological corridors in Belgium and France. Restoration activities aim at implementing innovative practices for management of vegetation of these green corridors in the forest, and raising awareness of various audiences about the importance of biodiversity in these linear habitats.

The easements of the high-voltage network occupy broad spaces, cross many and varied uses of the territory (forests, farmlands, crops, natural habitats of great biological interest, ...) and are confronted with various expectations by the population.

Taking into account the players in the territory and of the local context is, for the electricity Transmission System Operators, an asset in establishing alternative and sustainable management of vegetation in the electricity power line easements.

This booklet is devoted to illustrating the interest and establishment of partnerships with participants from the rural world.

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Conventional management: a fear that generates a reassuring “safety procedure”

The primary mission of the electricity operator to ensure the safe and continuous transmission of electricity has strongly guided its policy in management of vegetation. Trees which grow under and alongside the lines are considered as a potential risk that must be controlled on a large scale and safely. However, managing the living environment is not central to the trade of electricians.

Conventionally, therefore, electricity transmission companies throughout Europe have habitually dealt with vegetation far upstream of the potential risk. Most of the time they do this by keeping vegetation far from their structures by felling, tillage and more broadly still by regular use of mulchers.

Line maintenance personnel are therefore trained to anticipate the electrical risk, to schedule elimination of troublesome vegetation and to subcontract with firms that specialise in elimination of vegetation.

For a TSO, being itself the steering, monitoring and responsible body for management of vegetation appears to be the best means of ensuring safety. But this is often at the price of negative consequences in acceptance by neighbouring residents, the quality of the landscapes and biodiversity.

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Management entrusted to third parties: a bet and a company (r)evolution

The challenge is then to reverse the parameters.

The first is to view vegetation as a potential ally rather than as a threat.

Next is to find the means to entrust management of softer vegetation to rural partners who are in the business or who have real expertise.

There are therefore two important pillars in the relationship which TSOs have with vegetation which have to be questioned:

- a fresh look at vegetation
- delegation of its management to third parties

It remains clear however that the responsibility for electrical safety remains central to the TSOs business. Ultimately, they are the sole ones who assume this obligation.

But it is by other avenues and often through a new trade for their line staff. It is now a question of verifying that management of vegetation entrusted to third parties works well, that it is monitored over time, that agreements are renewed (see [booklet 9](#)), that the alternative methods established (mowing, grazing, management of the edges, management of natural habitats; see booklets [3](#), [4](#), and [6](#)) respond well to the safety issues.

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Reinvesting third parties in the “No man’s land” of the easements

Although they are never owners of line routes easements, TSOs nonetheless “occupy” them heavily by conventional management of vegetation.

Owners, compensated for creation of the line, have most often relinquished conventional management of the forest environments: planting, silviculture. They have assimilated the regular passing of mulching from electricity operators and have in some way conceded management.

The first challenge is therefore to regain the interest of rural players, in their wide variety, to the part they could acquire from these areas that are significant for their activities.

Owners, farmers, breeders, hunters, territorial development structures (nature park, nature spaces conservatory, NGOs, ...) can find on these surfaces an interest in taking management of vegetation on themselves.

Most of the time they will do it with an increased level of local acceptance, with a frequently positive impact on the landscape and with real benefits for biodiversity.



Creation of an extensive grassy feeding area for big game may be of interest to hunters



Livestock, forest production and high-voltage network can get along very well

Indeed, the establishment of softer alternative management (selective felling, establishment of grazing, mowing, restoration of natural habitat...) is generally better perceived by the population than conventional and more radical management of the corridor (use of a mulcher).

It also anchors the electricity operator in the local fabric and avoids the impression of distant management decisions, standardised and with little connection with the realities in the field. Finally, it demonstrates that the electricity operator is working with growing concern for societal acceptance of its infrastructure and their dependencies.

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The TSO with the initiative

To best ensure this search for sustainable partnerships with third parties, TSOs must increase their in-depth knowledge of the major rural players. It is in fact through large umbrella organisations that TSOs have an interest in negotiating this shared management of vegetation under the lines.

These players are for the most part gathered in regional or national federations where the field players, as members, are found with which the TSOs will ultimately agree on the terms of alternative management.

Federations of public owners, private owners, nature parks, hunters, chambers of agriculture, large nature associations are all groups whose size and especially sustainability can ensure TSOs a sustainable and supervised transfer of vegetation management.

The general terms of the partnerships have every interest in being framed at the level of these large national or regional bodies before being adapted to the local context with players in the field, members of these large umbrella organisations.

A first stage of agreement can therefore very usefully be deployed between the TSO and these large federations. It will give the general scope in which the local partnerships will then enrol.

This cultural change of electric line companies in being open to third parties then moves as a priority to line maintenance personnel and the organisers (those responsible for relations of the TSO with local partners).

Their detailed knowledge of the territory and the fabric of players allows them to listen to the requests or wishes of local partners, to grasp the potentialities and opportunities on the ground, and to mobilise the vital forces. They can thus better identify the local player, ideally a member of one of these large organisations, which can be able or wish to develop differentiated management of the vegetation under the lines.

From the old view of vegetation which dictated the date of the next mulching, they today have the ability to wonder what opportunity could develop for soft management under the lines and which local player could be interested to see it develop.

The overhead power lines cross regions with a great variety of identities, uses and natural peculiarities. For this reason, management of electricity corridors cannot be thought of uniformly but must be adapted to local specifics. It is an opportunity to rely on the experience of players who have a good knowledge of the terrain and local practices.

A frame of reference is defined at the national level. It outlines the rights and duties of stakeholders. Its practical implementation is negotiated with the players in the field to best meet the local specifics, expectations and constraints. Here are some examples:

- a breeder or farmer who moves in may be interested in these plots in the context of difficult access to the land



Erection of beehives along the corridor is one way to enhance the value of the electricity easement

- a municipality may, when renting hunting territories, be interested in having these surfaces under the lines for food and cover for game
- a homeowner will be open to the possibility of obtaining firewood from the developed edges
- a nature association or a regional nature park may incorporate the natural habitats under the lines in management of its nearby nature reserves

Identification of these essential players is therefore based on detailed rural knowledge as well as their expectations. This is what can be discerned by the TSO's maintenance and organising personnel.

Two different levels of TSO personnel, national and regional, are therefore put into action to determine these two levels of the partnership.

In France, RTE has, for many years already, entered into partnerships with rural players. From the outset, RTE engaged in a "win-win" mindset. Since management of nature is not its core business, the company has enriched itself by collaborating with stakeholders who, in return, derive an interest from a change of management practices or establishment of development favourable to nature through their own activity.

In order to reinforce the consistency of actions across the territory of France, RTE has signed partnership agreements with national federations which are then disseminated at more regional or local scales.

The following few partners (non-exhaustive list) demonstrate the multiplicity and diversity of the challenges: the Regional Nature Parks, Natural Spaces Conservatories, the Bird Protection League, the National Federation of Hunters, the Nature Reserves of France, the National Livestock Confederation,...

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Acceptance by neighbouring residents



An open area such as this may be of interest to a farmer, bee-keeper or hunter

Taking on management by a local player presents many benefits, the main one being facilitating acceptance of the project by neighbouring residents and other local users of the space, as well as allowing them to take another look at the overhead electric power lines and their management.

This can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, establishment of alternative management (selective felling, establishment of grazing, mowing..) is generally better perceived by the population than more radical management of the corridor (use of a mulcher). On the other hand, establishment of

softer management, by a local player, is more rooted in reality and felt less as a technocratic decision, taken in high places. Establishment of local and sustainable partnerships is appreciated more by the public and neighbouring residents. It demonstrates that the electricity operator is working with growing concern for societal acceptance of its infrastructure.

7

New job for maintenance personnel

Implementing the bet to entrust vegetation management to third parties profoundly changes the work of the linesmen.

The responsibility for electrical safety still remains firmly in their hands and those of the TSO.

But it is now provided by third parties, ideally by having them gathered around the signing of an agreement.

It is therefore more a question for these staff of monitoring the proper functioning of these partnerships in the field than ordering external companies to do the work of mulching or felling.

Two axes can be decisive for the success of this new methods of vegetation management and its full acceptance by the linesmen.

Specific training first of all on the issues and methods for differentiated management of vegetation favourable to biodiversity is necessary. It must assist the linesman (person responsible for the safety of electrical structures and therefore for controlling the growth of vegetation in the forest environment) to take a new look on the natural dynamics of vegetation under the lines, to identify the rural players able to implement it and to give them the tools necessary to monitor these partnerships, ensuring the safety of the lines.

Integration of these partnerships with the tools for monitoring the lines follows. Cartographic and forecasting tools for vegetation management must be able to include, simply and with the ability of being mobile in the field, the identities of partners, the agreements reached with each of them, their deadlines, their possibility of renewal,... The role of the linesman is therefore changed - he must be able to monitor these partnerships, energise them, renew them and reframe them if necessary.

8

How are partnerships to be built for the long term?

Identification of local players, establishment of partnership projects, consistency with a national policy must offer as much as possible in the way of guarantees of sustainability in the actions undertaken.



How to reconcile local involvement and network safety

A common history created between the TSO and the partner, relevant actions, convincing and measured results, all help to ensure stability of actions over the long term.

An investment will have to be accepted in order to set up these local partnerships. Longer to implement than a simple cutting site, the results achieved will allow for "stabilising" the managed area and bring more benefits than the mere safety of the network.

8.1. Contracting

Establishment of the partnership is formalised through a contractual agreement signed by the various parties concerned. We refer the reader to [booklet 9](#) for more information on this subject.

8.2. Reinvigorating and updating the partnership

In order to ensure good functioning of the partnership, it is necessary to have good communication between the different parties. A local anchor for the TSO proves again to be a clear asset.

In the framework of large-scale partnerships (with federations or national umbrellas), a monitoring committee will be usefully designated. Composed of representatives of the various parties, it will allow preparation, at least annually, of a statement of actions taken, bring up local information and propose potential improvements.

Solidly built partnerships are generally renewed after their first term expires.

8.3. Enhancing the partnership

A successful partnership is based in particular on the trust and support of the collaborators (or members, ...) of the different parties. This membership includes good internal communication.

The TSO, like the stakeholders, also has an interest in outreach communication to illustrate accomplishments and collaboration...which could lead to others.

9

Financial assistance in support of the partnership

The search for a partner for establishment of sustainable site management may be facilitated by obtaining bonuses or subsidies, most often public, European, national and/or regional. Such aid is sometimes the clincher for establishment of a collaboration, in particular with the agricultural sector in the midst of various crises and in search of alternatives.

We refer the reader to the rules in force in each country for the methods of obtaining the aid mentioned below.

9.1. Agro-environmental and climate measures (AECM)

This European agro-environmental programme consists of establishing practices conducive to protection of the environment (preservation of biodiversity, water, soil, climate), conservation of heritage (animal or plant) and maintenance of landscapes in the agricultural area. It is a pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), complementary to the one focused on the development of agricultural production, supporting agricultural markets and prices.

A farmer who voluntarily subscribes in the programme receives financial assistance to cover the effort and costs relating to implementation of methods that contribute to sustainable agriculture.

In the context of high-voltage lines, these are more particularly bonuses which can be granted for sustainable management of natural grasslands or grasslands of high biological value. The measures and aid in force as well as the conditions for award are set by each Member State.

9.2. Natura 2000

"Natura 2000" is an ecological network of sites designed to ensure conservation of threatened habitats and species in Europe. This is an initiative of the European Union aimed at stopping the decline of biodiversity.

The goal of this network is to reconcile human activities and preservation of nature. Sites integrated with the network can still be the subject of silviculture management or agriculture but the manager must ensure the application of management measures that permit maintenance of the environment in a good state of conservation.

To compensate for the effort, costs and shortfalls associated with implementation of management measures, the owner or manager of a Natura 2000 site can take advantage of certain benefits that vary in nature depending on the country or region. In Wallonia, for example, there are financial compensations, tax benefits or subsidies for restoration of degraded natural habitats.

9.3. Other state aid

In most Member States, state aid is available (possibly at different levels of government: national or regional) for implementation of management nature-friendly measures, sometimes through calls for projects. It is necessary to learn about the measures specific to each Member State. A good knowledge of these funding mechanisms can be used to implement large-scale ecological developments that could not have been established without external assistance.

In the Walloon Region, the PwDR, the Walloon Programme for Rural Development 2014-2020, allows for funding of one-off projects. In this context we should mention the possibility of restoring parcels of land located in Natura 2000 zones and forming part of the SEP (Main Ecological Structure).

<http://biodiversite.wallonie.be/fr/demande-de-subvention-a-la-restauration-ou-a-l-entretien-des-habitats-et-especes-d-interet-communautaire.html?IDC=837&IDD=5021>

9.4. Financial assistance from the TSO

Some TSOs rely on a paid partnership, on an ad hoc basis (for example, for establishment of alternative management on a site with particular constraints) or in a more continuous way, for example, as part of a defined programme. In Finland, for example, the TSO funds private owners who invest in nature-related measures. After validation of a management plan prepared by an expert, they can receive € 300/ha for implementation of actions.

LIFE Elia

Enhancement of the electricity transmission network's easements as active vectors for biodiversity

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