Sheep as forest managers – Management of young forest stands by grazing sheep

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Sheep are often used in management of rural landscapes but they can even be set to work in commercial forest management. Managed forests need thinning 10-20 years after stand establishment. These early forest operations usually do not give an immediate financial return but do improve the future growing conditions of the stand. Early thinning operations are often neglected because of the costs and the forest owner has to wait many years before receiving a return on the investment. Sheep grazing can save costs on thinning in spruce, pine and mixed forest stands.

Sheep are natural-born forest managers as they like eating willow, rowan, aspen and alder. These tree species are normally removed during thinning. Due to their selective feeding habits, sheep will leave the commercially more valuable forestry trees such as pine and spruce largely untouched. The appropriate stocking rate differs for different types of pasture and varies from 0.2-4 ewes per hectare.

At too high stocking rates, sheep may also browse pine and birch but at an appropriate stocking rate, and when there is enough other deciduous browse and grass available, they will leave pine and spruce trees in peace. This is however site dependent, and when practicing forest grazing you have to keep an eye on it to ensure that there is still sufficient natural regeneration.

Other advantages are that the sheep have access to shade on hot summer days and in most cases no supplementary feeding is needed. Even in this year's extremely dry summer in Finland, Otto Makkonen from Savonranta in eastern Finland, had no need for supplementary feeding

as there was plentiful natural forage available. This demonstrates the usefulness of forest grazing as a climate resilient agroforestry practice.

More information:

AFINET Technical Article:
http://eurafagroforestry.eu/afinet/materials/technical-articles/sheeps_as_forest_managers

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