

QUALITY LIFT TO OPEN TIMBER MARKETS

Not what the mills want: logs of *Gmelina arborea*, commonly grown by smallholders.



JACK BAYNES

Producing timber of the quality sawmills demand could give smallholder tree farmers more chance of a sustainable income, writes David Adams

Unable to access markets and producing timber not up to the standard required by sawmills, smallholder tree farmers on the island of Leyte in the Philippines have faced uncertainty over their livelihoods.

Under an ACIAR-supported project, however, a joint Australian–Philippine team is now working to address these issues to help the long-term sustainability of smallholder tree farms.

Launched in Leyte Province – based on an island in the Visayas group – in January 2005, the \$700,000 project follows an earlier four-year initiative which identified the constraints and impediments facing smallholder farmers in the region.

Dr John Herbohn, a senior lecturer in tropical forestry at the University of Queensland and Australian project leader, says it became obvious during the previous project that smallholders who had planted trees eight to 10 years ago were facing problems finding markets.

“Whenever we would visit a community we would be asked: where can we sell our trees?” he says. Even the smallholders who did manage to sell their timber found they were not receiving the price they expected.

Paradoxically, sawmillers also reported that they could not obtain the timber they wanted.

In response, ACIAR decided to fund a new three-year project to look at ways of improving financial returns to smallholders for their existing timber, and to examine ways in which future returns to smallholders who are planting now could also be improved. The collaborative project involves representatives from the University of Queensland, the Philippine Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and Leyte State University.

While smallholders producing timber on Leyte Island work on farms ranging in size from just a couple of trees up to 400 hectares or more, Dr Herbohn says the project is focusing on those with farms up

to three or four hectares in size, which are by far the most common.

Usually family-run, these farms largely produce timber from the fast-growing species *Gmelina arborea*, along with mahogany and some acacias and eucalypts. Many smallholders are also showing interest in planting native species, including the narra (the national tree), but few have been planted.

With the bottom-line aim of increasing returns to smallholder tree farmers, the latest project centres on two main prongs – one aimed at addressing government policy constraints that hinder smallholders accessing markets, the other at looking at how the smallholders can produce timber better able to meet market requirements.

In addressing the first of the two, Dr Herbohn says members of the ACIAR team, who are based at Leyte State University, are working directly with officers from DENR to examine the tree registration process. “At the moment there’s some major problems with the way that the tree registration process is being implemented,” he says. “So part of the project has been to look at why people are having problems registering trees, and to get information to people about the registration process.”

To that end, earlier this year a series of workshops were held involving the ACIAR team, representatives of DENR, smallholders and other stakeholders at which they developed a primer on tree registration for smallholders. Not only does the primer – which has been translated into local dialects – show how to register trees, it also debunks some of the myths about the process.

As well as looking at issues surrounding the implementation of the policies, Dr Herbohn says the project is feeding back information to the Philippine authorities through the project’s advisory committee on whether existing policies need to be changed or amended.

The second main prong of the project – helping smallholders to better meet market requirements – emerged after it was found that one of the reasons why farmers had trouble finding a market was that they did not supply the timber in a form that the mills wanted.

“For instance, one of the mills that we talked to only wanted fitches, basically rectangular blocks of timber sawn with a circular saw, whereas all the timber being produced by smallholders is cut using chainsaws, so they’re much rougher and they’re just not what the mills want,” Dr Herbohn says.

To counter these difficulties, the project is seeking ways to provide better communication between tree farmers and the mills, and is trialling a number of pilot projects. These include creating a database of timber merchants for smallholders and another database for the merchants detailing what timber smallholders are producing. Other initiatives are also being investigated – a possible radio segment to provide information about potential markets, how to grow trees and how to get all the required permits.

To address the difficulties smallholders face in finding markets, a manual is being developed to explain important aspects of tree farming. This complements a manual for tree nursery techniques developed as part of the previous project.

The ACIAR project team has also trialled bus tours of smallholders to demonstration sites as a cost-effective means of providing information about how to better grow and manage their trees. Up to 20 smallholders are taken on a tour of four or five tree-farming sites.

“There’s a lot of really bad timber being grown,” says Dr Herbohn. “So there’s a desperate need for better silviculture and better management of these tree farms. At the moment, there’s just a total lack of knowledge about how to grow good trees.”

Part of the broader aim of the project is to develop better smallholder tree-farm systems that provide economic, social and environmental benefits.

“Tree farms often form part of a broader livelihood strategy of smallholders and it is important that we consider them as part of this

bigger picture,” Dr Herbohn says. “An important part of the project is to identify the social and economic factors that make livelihood systems incorporating tree farms successful, and to use these to design better farming systems for smallholders.

“Part of the project is also looking at how tree farms can be used to help restore the rich biodiversity of Leyte, that has been eroded due to the loss of native forests.”

While the project is already having an impact on Leyte, Dr Herbohn says the team is always conscious of considering how its initiatives could be used on a broader scale across the Philippines.

“It’s something that is beyond the scope of our current project, but it could be something that an organisation like AusAID might be interested in,” he says. “We’re running these pilot projects to see if they are effective. If we can identify some winners, then we hope to be able to work with one of the international aid organisations to roll them out on a broader scale.”

PARTNER COUNTRY: Philippines

PROJECT: redevelopment of a timber industry following extensive land clearing (ASEM/2000/088)

DESCRIPTION: addresses the problem of slow uptake of farm and community forestry in the Philippines and north Queensland

CONTACT: Dr John Herbohn, john.herbohn@uq.edu.au;
Dr Eduardo Mangaoang, edon@skynet.net

SAMUEL BERNALDEZ



Team members measure trees on smallholder farms to provide information on likely timber yields.



At this small bandsaw mill on Leyte, *Gmelina* logs from smallholders are used to make furniture.

JOHN HERBOHN