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Lothar has made the forests more stable

Hurricane Lothar swept across western and central Europe in 1999 with devastating results, but ten years on Swiss foresters can also see positive effects.

Forester Jakob Zaugg still has vivid memories of the storm that took its toll of countless forests in Switzerland: "Trees flew through the air like arrows, with their roots. I've never seen anything like that before."

Lothar developed wind speeds of up to 160 km/h in the Swiss Mittelland. It sent roofs and façades flying into the air as though they were scraps of paper, and uprooted and snapped the trunks of ten million trees. It caused damage to property of around SFr600 million, while damage to forests was estimated at SFr750 million.

Ten years after the catastrophe spaces in the forests caused by Lothar are anything but bare. As a result of Lothar, trees that need light had a new chance. The storm gave the forest the opportunity to become more stable again. The thick undergrowth serves as a hiding place for animals and it provides a real feast for deer.

Lothar marks a kind of turning point in forestry policy. Although the Federal Environment Office was pleading for a more mixed forest even before Lothar, most forest owners went almost exclusively for spruce. The reason was money: Spruces grow quickly and produce a lot of good quality timber.

Lothar meant that the government's mixed forest policy was accepted within hours. With the massive decline in timber prices after the storm and the labour-intensive harvesting, many operations joined forces, and more technology was introduced.

from swissinfo

Muslims are offered course on Swiss society

Fribourg University is the first Swiss institution to offer a course to imams and Muslim community leaders on understanding how Swiss society works.

The vocational training is also open to non-Muslims with the purpose of fostering cross-cultural knowledge. It has largely been welcomed by the Islamic community.

The course is organised by the university, the Group of Researchers on Islam in Switzerland (GRIS) and the Paris-based International Institute of Islamic Thought.

The idea is to offer some answers to the federal and cantonal authorities which in recent years have had to deal with problems linked to the Muslim community, such as people not keeping to the principles of Swiss democracy. Muslims themselves are calling for their leaders to be better informed about the Swiss situation.

Many imams play a key role in integration. With more than 350,000 members or 4.3 per cent of the population, Islam is the second-largest religion in Switzerland.

The course encompasses modules on history of religion and European and Swiss society, as well as elements of Muslim theology adapted to the European context.

Not many courses of this type are to be found in Europe; only the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium runs a similar programme. *from swissinfo*

Milk producer Emmi posts big profit increase

Swiss dairy producer Emmi's profits rose more than 28 per cent to SFr75.3 million in 2009 on slightly lower sales. Lucerne-based Emmi, which employs around 3,300 people in Europe and North America, said in a statement the improvement "can be attributed to a solid market performance and rigorous cost management".

The company, which produced 904 million litres of milk and cream last year, noted a drop in prices of raw materials amid an increase in supply. Emmi expects volumes in Switzerland to decline one per cent this year and prices for raw materials to continue to fall.

from swissinfo

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