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Title of presentation: The Green Care WALD project: social commitment takes root in woodland

Abstract: Woodland has a positive effect on all our lives: it filters our drinking water, protects us from natural hazards, provides habitats for animals and plants, and is also important for the economy. We use woodland for leisure activities and relaxation, so it is also crucial in terms of helping us recover from the stresses of day-to-day life. Woodland presents an opportunity to tackle lifestyle diseases, which are associated with alienation from nature in times of increasing urbanisation. Numerous studies of the recreational function of woodland are examining the effects of time spent there on physical, mental and social health. This demonstrates the growing value being attributed to woodland from a health promotion and disease prevention perspective. As a setting for social and therapeutic interventions, woodland is also taking on greater significance in public and academic debate. In Austria we are very fortunate that almost half of the country is woodland and that this natural resource can open up innovative new opportunities.

The Green Care WALD project aims to promote social commitment that utilises woodland environments. It was launched in 2014 by the Bundesforschungszentrum für Wald (Austrian Research Centre for Forests) and is funded by the Austrian Rural Development Programme (LE 14-20).

Green Care WALD activities use woodland to facilitate interaction between people and nature and have health promotion, social or educational objectives, depending on the context. They are aimed at a diverse range of target groups, such as children and young people, adults, senior citizens, people with migrant backgrounds or people with physical or mental problems. Green Care WALD initiates partnerships between owners of woodland, forestry businesses and social, health, educational and economic actors, and supports the practical implementation of pilot ideas. This creates a synergy: promoting the well-being



of the target group in question while simultaneously opening up opportunities for diversification for the owners of the woodland.

This presentation will outline the contribution that woodland can make to physical, mental and social health as part of health promotion and disease prevention, as well as the specific pilot ideas which have already been implemented. We will also discuss possibilities for the systematic use of woodlands in the treatment of sick people.