

Interview: Director of the Rytel Forest District.

Can you describe what the day before the Rytel disaster was like?

The weather on that day, the 11th of August, was quite unusual. The air was extremely humid, brewing even, unlike the typical conditions before a normal thunderstorm. The storm approached from the Lower Silesia direction and started shortly after 11 p.m. Initially only lightning was visible, no audible thunder. Then the downpour started, accompanied by a gale-force wind, reaching speeds up to 150 km/h and lasting only a few minutes. The extent of the damage caused was enormous, however, because of the deceptively short duration and small range, many people discovered it only the following morning.

The foresters were first to witness the disastrous impact of the night storm. They immediately started with rescue operations even before the fire brigade was able to arrive. This area, is extremely popular amongst tourists and there was a scout camp in the forest.

People from the surrounding villages turned up to help wherever they could but it was a daunting task. The devastation was expansive and made the reaching of victims extremely challenging and time-consuming as damaged trees obstructing roads, had to be removed in order to enable access to the victims.

Six people lost their lives, including two girl scouts at a camp near Suszek and one on the road to Rytel, on a campsite near Sforne Gacie.

What was the impact on the State Forest District after the storm?

A loss of about 40% of the wood resources was calculated, with 60% of the forest; one third of the area, having to be rehabilitated, resulting in a total of 1200 ha of reforestation.

How was the rescue operation carried out after the storm?

On Friday, before 3 p.m., the County Office received a second degree storm risk warning but unfortunately, this information did not reach the individual municipalities.

After the storm, first responder units, volunteer fire brigades from most villages in the vicinity, started with the clearing-up process. Equipped with saws, they started the arduous task of clearing the roads in order for additional rescue teams and ambulances to gain access to the impacted area. State Forests ordered foresters to assist wherever possible. We helped until we managed to get in touch with all the injured.

On Saturday, the army joined forces with other rescue teams and aided in the removal of heavy debris in and around the riverbed in order to prevent the possibility of additional flooding. Ensuring electricity supply to the affected as well as surrounding areas, was of the utmost importance and electric engineers from all over Poland worked together to repair damaged power lines. It turned out to be a mammoth challenge as there was a national shortage of the poles needed to produce these structures. Ultimately, the entire rescue operation lasted 4 weeks of which 3 were spent on reconstructing the electricity supply network.

Support for the survivors came from all over Poland. Special fundraisers were organized for those who lost their homes as a result of the disaster and the state also offered generous aid to the victims. Sadly, they were often negatively envied for the assistance they received from the government over time and this often resulted in conflict. Thankfully, solidarity far outweighed these unpleasant occurrences.

Both foresters and communities joined forces to rehabilitate the forest. The President of Poland (Andrzej Duda) - set a positive example by promoting the "Planting" campaign which resulted in hundreds of trees being planted. The reforestation programme was planned to be implemented over a period of five years. A 100-year-old forest was destroyed, so needless to say the process of its rehabilitation will take many years. It is estimated that the re-planted forest will reach its useful value only in 40 years.

Was it possible to somehow minimize the range and impact of the losses in the forest?

Losses could not be prevented, but the damaged suffered could have been less.

The reforestation project consists in planting of more oak and beech trees in favour of the usual pine. By reducing the amount of pine and introducing more varieties of trees, we are ultimately creating more diverse forests, with a predominance of oak.