

Regional News

Tree planters, herders clash over Nsowe Forest

Private tree planters have accused the herders for uprooting young trees, deforestation and vandalism in the Nsowe Forest reserve.

BY SADAT MBOGO

Pprivate tree planters in Nsowe Central Forest Reserve in Gomba District are locked in a fresh bitter dispute with nomadic herders, locally known as Balaalo, who are accused of invading planted areas, uprooting seedlings, and grazing cattle on land allocated for reforestation.

The conflict has led to significant losses, with planters reporting damages worth Shs10.5 billion since the invasions began last year, threatening a multi-billion shilling investment in environmental conservation.

Nsowe Central Forest Reserve is one of Uganda's 506 central forest reserves managed by the National Forestry Authority (NFA). Spanning thousands of hectares, the reserve has historically faced severe encroachment and degradation due to illegal logging, settlement, and farming.

To combat this, the government, through the NFA, initiated reforestation programmes aligned with the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act of 2003. In 2017, NFA invited private tree planters to restore the depleted sections by planting commercial trees like eucalyptus and pine. This plays a crucial role in biodiversity conservation, water catchment protection, and climate mitigation.

Initially, 175 locals who had been occupying the land prior to conservation plans were each allocated 25 acres.



Private tree planters arrest one of the herders they suspect to be behind the destruction of young trees in Nsowe Forest Reserve in Gomba District on February 23 2026. PHOTO/SADAT MBOGO

Overall, NFA designated 2,885 hectares for private planters and 1,750 hectares for indigenous communities. Since 2020, private planters have successfully planted trees on 2,308 hectares, representing a collective investment valued at Shs1.1 trillion.

However, tensions escalated with the arrival of the Balaalo herders, who claim ownership of the land and have been encroaching on the plantations.

Invasion

Mr James Byaruhanga, the chairperson of the Nsowe Commercial Tree Planters Association, comprising 55 members, said the herders operate under the cover of night and early morning, grazing their cattle and causing widespread destruction.

REFORESTATION

The National Forestry Authority designated 2,885 hectares for private planters and 1,750 hectares for indigenous communities designated to local individuals. Since 2020, private planters have successfully planted trees on 2,308 hectares, representing a collective investment valued at Shs1.1 trillion.

"We are puzzled by the coming of the Balaalo to the forest land. Funny enough, instead of planting trees like us, they use land to graze, destroy our

trees, beat up our casual workers, and destroy their temporary shelters," he said in an interview on Monday.

He detailed the extent of the damage: "Balaalo have uprooted two-year-old tree seedlings to create grazing space, destroyed nursery beds, cut down mature trees for sale, and stole or vandalised workers' food items, pesticides, tools, and other farm inputs."

The planters have reported the incidents to police, but claim the hands of law enforcers are tied due to the herders' alleged use of spears, sticks, and intimidation tactics.

This conflict comes amid recent government interventions in the area. In December 2025, President Museveni stepped in to address land wrangles between residents and the NFA in

Gomba, highlighting ongoing challenges in balancing conservation with community needs.

The intervention aimed to resolve disputes over forest land use, though planters say the issues persist.

They also called on the Ministry of Water and Environment to provide replacement of tree seedlings destroyed through the Inclusive Forest and Protected Areas for Climate-Smart Development (IFPA-CD) project and to fully implement the 2003 National Forest and Tree Planting Act.

Caught in the act

The situation took a turn on February 21, when three individuals were arrested during an impromptu visit to their eucalyptus fields. These were caught cutting down trees belonging to the private planters. Police has not yet commented on the arrests or potential charges.

Environmentalists warn that such clashes undermine Uganda's reforestation goals, especially as the country grapples with deforestation rates exceeding 2 percent annually.

Mr John Kibuuka, NFA Mpanga Sector Manager, overseeing forests in Mpigi, Butambala, and Gomba districts, said the matter is being handled by the prime minister after the president issued a directive to her to have a meeting over the same matter.

"I don't think it is in order for me to comment at this level," he said in a telephone interview.

Gomba District has 17 forest reserves. According to local leaders, herders are depleting the forest reserve through cutting down trees for charcoal and clearing other parts for agriculture.

They also claim other herders have constructed permanent houses, which is against the agreed terms, and requested NFA to revoke their grazing licenses. Gomba, like other neighbouring districts of Butambala and Mpigi, is gifted with many natural forests.

However, in the last two decades many have been cut down by people who migrate to the district looking for land to plant ginger and miraa (khat) which are the main cash crops in the area. This has adversely affected the rain patterns, leading to dry spells.