



Woodland Owner Notes

An Introduction to Forest Certification

Forests provide aesthetic, ecological, economic, recreational, and spiritual values to society. When people see trees harvested, they may need assurance that the harvest is not “destroying” the forest. *Forest certification* reassures them with a third-party evaluation of the management of a particular forest, assuring the public that the benefits and functions of the forest, including clean air and water, wildlife and plant habitat, soil protection, recreation, and more, are enhanced or protected during management and harvest.

Forest certification identifies land that is managed with a goal of sustainability. Sustainable forestry can be viewed as a “three-legged stool” where the legs represent the economic, ecological, and social aspects of forest management. Certification also ensures that management does not diminish the value of the future forest, nor create hardships for local communities. Certification is strictly voluntary; any landowner can participate.

Only about seven percent of the world’s forests are certified, but about 17 percent of the forests in the South are. While there is some disagreement on the definitions of sustainable forestry and the usefulness of forest certification in improving forest management, the number of acres under forest certification is increasing annually throughout the world. Because of its widespread impact on forest management, forest products, and forestland ownership, everyone needs to be aware of forest certification.

The Origins of Forest Certification

Various products, such as organic or kosher foods, use certification systems. Certification systems assure the consumer that the product they are purchasing meets certain standards. Forest certification refers to an *independent, third-party* evaluation of the management of a particular forest against a certain standard. Certification inspection is conducted by persons not connected financially or in any other way to the forest or landowner. Independent third-party certification is felt to have the most integrity of any certification system. When a consumer buys a product made with trees from a certified forest, he or she knows that the wood came from a well-managed forest.

Forest certification originated in the early 1990s following the United Nations’ Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At this time, forest certification was proposed as a means to protect tropical timber from exploitative harvesting. By certifying the management of certain tropical forests, wood products made from that timber could be labeled as “certified” to allay consumer concern. Forest certification has since spread to North America and virtually all timber-producing nations. Worldwide there are about 730 million acres of forestland certified, with about 60 million of these acres in the United States.

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Why Certify?

The costs and benefits to landowners

Forest certification can be costly to a landowner and will include both direct and indirect costs. One direct cost is the cost of the certification assessment. Assessment costs vary depending on the size of the acreage and other factors. In addition, a landowner may be required to pay to join the certifying organization in order to participate. Required changes in record keeping and monitoring necessary for certification can also add annual costs to forest management.

The benefits of forest certification are many. These may include:

- a healthier forest,
- better environmental practices,
- better long-term management planning,
- less waste,
- greater access to markets,
- a price premium from some buyers,
- personal and community pride in knowing the forest is well-managed, and
- a path for the continuous improvement of your forest management.

The Process

The certification process can be complicated and time-consuming. Some certification systems are designed for smaller properties and have simpler, more landowner-friendly processes. In general, a landowner wishing to have his or her forest property certified will first need to examine the philosophies, requirements, and costs of the four available certification systems. Only then can a landowner choose the most appropriate certification system.

The main steps in the forest certification process include:

1. Selecting an appropriate certification system
2. Contacting certifying organization
3. Gathering information and materials about your forest and management activities
4. Undergoing a verification audit
5. Receiving the certification report with decision
6. Implementing required changes
7. Scheduling follow-up audits at regular intervals

Landowners interested in forest certification should contact a certifier to receive detailed information on the standard that must be met and the process to be followed. Regardless of which system is chosen, the landowner or his or her forest manager will have to meet that program's *standard*. Each certification program has its own standard, developed in collaboration with varied

forestry interests that consider scientific knowledge and applicable laws. The standard describes the criteria (or performance measures) that must be met for the forest to be certified. These criteria include documentation (plans and records) as well as actions in the forest, such as installing stream buffers, managing road layout, and protecting soil conditions.

- *Indicators* are used to determine if the criteria are being met.
- *Verifiers* are the evidence supporting the indicators. Independent assessors compare indicators to the management records and the performance in the forest, looking for verifiers (evidence) that meet the criteria. Forests that don't meet the criteria may be given time to implement changes so that they can be certified. Successful certifications may be good for one to five years. Based on certification system guidelines, re-audit processes are required and follow a published timeline.

All standards require a written up-to-date forest management plan, which should be in place before pursuing certification. A simple forest management plan may need significant rewriting to qualify for certification. Prior to starting the certification process, a landowner should work with a consulting forester to assess readiness to proceed with the process. Preparing for the audit takes time and requires an organized method of comparing the management of the forest, record keeping, and various other aspects of ownership to the requirements of the chosen standard.

The standards for all systems cover such things as water quality, wildlife habitat, aesthetics, biodiversity, and chemical use. Often there are criteria in the standards that do not apply to all properties, in which case there is no requirement to meet that particular standard (i.e. a standard regarding chemical use when there is no use of or plan to use chemicals). Rigorous forest certification systems contain standards related to both *process* and *performance*.

- Process-based criteria examine the systems in place that would "catch" activities that violate laws, policies, or procedures.
- Performance-based criteria evaluate what is actually applied on the ground and compare it to the standard.

A total cost estimate for the audit should be provided to the landowner before the audit. Some programs will require advance payment to the certifier.

Types of Certification

There are three types of forest certification:

- Forest Management,
- Group Certification, and
- Chain of Custody.

Forest Management certification is the most common type of certification. Forest management certification evaluates the management of a specific piece of forestland against an agreed upon standard. Certification can be specific to a single tract even though the forest manager may own or manage other forests. The certificate will specify which forest is certified as meeting the standard.

An alternative to traditional forest management certification is known as **Group Certification**. The Forest Stewardship Council, the American Tree Farm System, and Green Tag Forestry all offer this option. Group certification is a newer aspect of U.S. forest certification systems designed to reduce the cost of certification to each individual owner by combining their forest management under one professional or one certificate holder. Certified groups have a common manager or management team who does not hold title or have any legal or management right to the property. The group manager is someone contracted by the landowners based on some commonality: proximity, family ties, or a single forestry consultant.

Chain of Custody certification provides a system for tracking wood from the forest to the finished product. Chain of custody certification is available to manufacturers, mills, distributors, and retailers who purchase, use, or sell certified wood. A chain of custody system, coupled with a product label identifying the certification system, assure the public that the wood product labeled “certified” was produced from a well-managed forest. The label is an important part of forest certification because it distinguishes the product at the store. The certification label helps both concerned consumers and responsible forest managers buy and sell products that come from well-managed forests. At present, the Forest Stewardship Council and Sustainable Forestry Initiative offer chain of custody certification, and the Forest Stewardship Council, Sustainable Forestry Initiative and Green Tag Forestry have product labels.

Forest Certification Programs

In the United States, there are four forest certification options for landowners. These certification programs differ in genesis, cost, philosophy, and implementation. Certification programs include:

- The American Tree Farm System (ATFS)
- The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)
- Green Tag Forestry
- Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI)

Of these four, only FSC operates worldwide.

Additional programs exist for other timber-producing nations.

American Tree Farm System

The American Tree Farm System is a program of the American Forest Foundation (AFF), a national nonprofit organization. The ATFS was started in 1941 as a means to promote the benefits of scientific forestry at a time when leaders of industry felt that America’s private forests were being cut at unsustainable rates. The first Tree Farms served as demonstration sites. Landowners could become Tree Farm members only after an inspection of their property and management plan by a professional forester. ATFS membership is open to any individual or organization owning between 10 and 10,000 acres.

Requirements include:

- A written management plan that protects water quality, wildlife habitat, soil conservation, produces forest products, and prevents fire, insects, disease, and destructive grazing within the forest.
- Inspection of the property by an ATFS volunteer forest professional. If the property meets the AFF Standards of Sustainability for Forest Certification (Figure 1), the landowner receives a certificate and the recognizable diamond-shaped Tree Farm sign.
- A landowner’s property is inspected every five years to maintain Tree Farm certification status. There is no cost to the landowner to obtain individual ATFS certification, but there may be a fee for group certification.

The group certification program under ATFS is a third-party auditing process that promotes the banding together of individual forest owners under one umbrella organization to comply with ATFS processes. In addition, forest owners agree to manage their forests to the AFF’s Standards of Sustainability. The group certification program does have fees associated with it, and depending on the group organization, fees may or may not be passed down to the landowners.

Fig. 1. Sample of a standard, performance measure and indicators from the American Tree Farm System Standard.

Standard: Air, Water and Soil Protection

Performance Measure: Application of forest chemicals must not exceed the levels necessary to achieve specific management objectives.

Indicators:

1. Chemicals are applied only when necessary to meet specific management objectives.
2. Management plans consider integrated pest management as a preferred means of controlling insect pests, pathogens and vegetative competition.
3. Chemical are applied in accordance with EPA-approved labels and meet or exceed all human health and environmental safety requirements on the label, and in local, state, and federal law.

Forest Stewardship Council

The Forest Stewardship Council was founded in 1993 by loggers, foresters, economists, environmentalists, and sociologists to promote “environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management of the world’s forests.” FSC seeks to ensure that forest management is done in a way that maintains the forest’s biodiversity, productivity, and ecology. The FSC standard includes a *social* component that acknowledges the sustainable forest management benefits to local communities and society. FSC advocates balancing economic objectives with ecosystem objectives and the well-being of the local community.

FSC certification includes a product label certifying that management, harvesting, processing, and manufacture of the product met FSC certification standards. While FSC creates the standard, accredited third-party organizations do the actual certification assessments. In the United States, accrediting organizations include Scientific Certification Systems, SmartWood, and SGS, among others. A landowner interested in FSC certification may contact these certifiers directly.

The **FSC Family Forest** program is tailored to the small nonindustrial forestland ownerships common in North Carolina. The Family Forests program is offered in the United States for forests or a group of forests less than 2,470 acres in size, or low intensity managed forests that harvest less than 20 percent of the average annual growth. The Family Forest program greatly streamlines the certification process while maintaining the integrity of the FSC standard with the goal of making FSC certification more accessible to small, private landowners.

The FSC Group Certification program, which was

Figure 2. Sample Principle, Criterion, Indicator and Verifier from the Forest Stewardship Council’s Southeast Standards.

Principle 5: Benefits from the forest

Criterion 5.1.

Forest management should strive toward economic viability, while taking into account the full environmental, social, and operational costs of production, and ensuring the investments necessary to maintain the ecological productivity of the forest.

Indicator 5.1a.

Forest owners or managers are financially able to support long-term (i.e. decades rather than quarter-years or years) forest management (e.g. planning, inventory, resource protection, post-harvest management activities).

Verifiers:

1. A budget shows that projected revenues and/or investments are sufficient to cover itemized activities and long-term management objectives with detail appropriate to scale. Such records can be considered proprietary.
2. Adequate revenues from timber sales are reserved for budgeted expenditures.

started in 1995, certifies a group’s forest management model and philosophy as implemented on selected lands. The enrolled group properties must be managed to either the full FSC standard or the abbreviated Family Forests Certification standard. Group certification allows small landowners to participate in FSC certification at a vastly reduced cost. This model lends itself to certification of consulting foresters, resource managers, landowner associations, cooperatives, land trusts and other woodland owner or management groups. The group manager must meet all the technical and procedural requirements of an FSC forest management certification.

Green Tag Forestry

Green Tag Forestry is a third-party certification system that was developed by the National Forestry Association in cooperation with the Association of Consulting Foresters and the National Woodland Owners Association with the goal of providing low-cost access to forest certification to small private landowners, and also to recognize outstanding forest management on small properties. The Green Tag Forestry program certifies a range of tract sizes with a simplified standard that covers important environmental areas but is accessible to small nonindustrial forest ownerships.

The management of a Green Tag Forest has been certified as incorporating good forestry practices that assure a balance of natural diversity and sustainable

forest productivity. Green Tag Forestry has 10 criteria that outline its approach to forest management. Within these criteria, there are 46 indicators that define successful conformance. The program provides low-cost recognition to landowners who practice responsible and sustainable woodland stewardship. These criteria and indicators are based on the Montreal Process indicators as adapted by the U.S. Forest Service as measures of sustainable forestry in the United States.

Figure 3. Sample of criterion and indicators from the Green Tag Forestry Standard.

Criterion: Forest Planning and Management
Indicators:
1. Written, ten-year management plan is in place, documented and updated periodically;
2. Landowner holds clear title and has considered easements;
3. Property boundaries are known and clearly marked;
4. Professional forestry advice (private and/or public) has been identified and obtained
5. Clear commitment to stewardship has been demonstrated
6. Contractors (logging, road, others) are informed of forestry plan and/or goals.

Sustainable Forestry Initiative

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative was adopted in 1994 by the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA) as a means to improve the health and sustainability of industrial forestland in the United States. The SFI standard for forest management includes principles, objectives, performance measures, and core indicators that must be met in order to earn designation as a sustainably managed forest. SFI is overseen by the Sustainable Forestry Board, an independent organization created to maintain and enhance the standard and assessment procedures. SFI covers nearly all the forest industry land in the United States and is also well-represented in Canada.

The complexity of the SFI standard and auditing process does not lend itself to the management of family forests. Family forest owners wishing to have their timber sold under the SFI designation may get certified under the American Tree Farm System. The SFI program has *mutual recognition* with the ATFS, meaning that certification under either system is recognized by the other system as valid. The SFI program is also recognized by the Canadian Standards Association and the international Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification schemes (PEFC).

Figure 4. Sample of Objective, Performance Measure and Indicators from the SFI standard.

Objective: To ensure long-term forest productivity and conservation of forest resources through prompt reforestation, soil conservation, afforestation, and other measures.
Performance Measure: Program participants shall reforest after final harvest, unless delayed for site-specific environmental or forest health considerations, through artificial regeneration within two years or two planting seasons, or by planned natural regeneration methods within five years.
Indicators
1. Designation of all management units for either natural or artificial regeneration.
2. Clear criteria to judge adequate regeneration and appropriate actions to correct understocked areas and achieve acceptable species composition and stocking rates for both artificial and natural regeneration.
3. Minimized plantings of exotic tree species and research documentation that exotic tree species, planted operationally, pose minimal risk.
4. Protection of desirable or planned advanced natural regeneration during harvest.
5. Artificial reforestation programs that consider potential ecological impacts of a different species or species mix from that which was harvested.

Future Prospects

Forest certification continues to grow in application worldwide, particularly on large or industrial properties desiring access to foreign or high-priced markets. At the same time, the certifying programs are evolving as they strive to become more affordable and accessible to small landholdings. The future may see more consolidation of certification programs through mutual recognition, and the expectation is that it will remain a strictly voluntary, market-driven approach to improving forest management. More family forest landowners will likely get on board with forest certification when they feel it is a cost-effective and useful marketing tool for their timber. Additional resources on forest certification and a chart comparing the four systems described here are located on the next page.

Appendix: Comparison of Certification Systems

Certification System	American Tree Farm System (ATFS)	Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)	Green Tag Forestry	Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI)
Sponsor	American Forest Foundation (AFF)	Forest Stewardship Council	National Forestry Association (NFA)	American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA)
Year established	1941	1993	1998	1995
Primary scope	US; Non-industrial private landowners with 10,000 acres or less	Worldwide; All forest ownership types	US; Non-industrial private landowners	US and Canada; Industrial Forests
Fee	No fee for individual landowner certification; Fee for group certification	Yes	Yes	Yes
Basis for participation	Voluntary	Voluntary	Voluntary	Required for AF&PA members; voluntary for others
Governance	Self-governing	Board of Directors and membership	National Forestry Association	Sustainable Forestry Board
Standard development	Independent, multi-stakeholder panel; approved by the AFF Board of Trustees	Committees of members and stakeholders with public input	NFA in cooperation with the Association of Consulting Foresters and the National Woodland Owners Association	Sustainable Forestry Board with public input
Issues covered by standard	Environmental and silvicultural	Environmental, silvicultural, economic and social	Environmental, silvicultural, economic and social	Environmental, silvicultural and social
Verification options	2 nd party	3 rd party required	3 rd party required	1 st , 2 nd or 3 rd party
Eco-label implemented	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Chain of custody system Implemented	No	Yes	No	Yes
Certified acres in United States	29 million	10 million	69 thousand	56 million

Additional Forest Certification Resources

American Tree Farm System

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<http://www.southernstableforests.org/>

Southern Center for Sustainable Forests

<http://scsf.env.duke.edu/>

Sustainable Forests Partnership

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<http://sfp.cas.psu.edu/>

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