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Industry-Backed Sustainable Forest Certification Attacked

By HAL BERNTON

Willamette Industries has ventured into green marketing with a sustainable forestry certification of its 610,000 acres in Oregon.

The designation -- intended to assure consumers that Willamette is protecting fish, wildlife, water and forests -- was conferred by an accounting firm that sent foresters and a biologist to inspect Willamette's forest lands.

But the standards used were developed by American Forest and Paper Association, an industry trade group. And environmentalists are upset.

"These standards were written by the industry for themselves," said Daniel Hall of the American Lands Alliance, a conservation group. "They're very vague, fail to protect the environment and are not a credible certification system."

Conservationists view Willamette's announcement as an attempt to co-opt a rival international certification system launched by the Forest Stewardship Council.

Willamette's plunge into certification represents the latest evolution of a timber industry eager to show earth-friendly practices. A decade ago, most big retailers were unconcerned about the source of their wood products, so long as the price was right. Spurred by environmental activists, many European retailers and a few U.S. retailers now are giving preference to certified wood products.

The forest products industry initially balked at certification but since has decided to fashion its own.

"Like any good business enterprise, we evolved with the marketplace of public opinion," said John Heissenbuttel, a vice president of the American Forest and Paper Association.

Through the industry-sponsored program, all members of the association are assumed to be managing their 52 million acres of U.S. forests in a responsible manner. If members want to gain more credibility, they can hire accounting firms to conduct audits.

Willamette was the first to act, hiring PricewaterhouseCoopers. Auditors praised the company for its efforts to improve fish survival, help bats and work with communities to reduce the visual effects of clear-cutting. As an extension of the certification, the company also would consider expanding its efforts to identify rare plants and wildlife habitat and to minimize the visual effects of logging.

The program is winning few backers outside the forest products industry. Earlier this year, Home Depot announced that it would give preference to certified wood products by 2002. But it plans to work with the

Beaverton-based Certified Forest Products Council, a business association that recognizes the Forest Stewardship Council certification program but not the industry-sponsored program Willamette uses.

"They (Willamette Industries officials) ought to be acknowledged for taking a positive step and beginning a process of certification. But is it enough? Is it credible to the marketplace?" said David Ford, president of the Certified Forest Products Council. He said he thinks the Forest Stewardship Council has that credibility.

The council was formed in 1993 to unify independent certification efforts. It had the support of environmentalists eager to realize their vision of responsible forestry. That vision includes smaller clear-cuts and, in the Northwest, a shift by big companies away from the practice of cutting most of their forests on cycles of 40 to 60 years.

About 40 million acres have been certified worldwide through the Forest Stewardship Council standards. Only about 5 million acres of it are in the United States, but the U.S. acreage is increasing by about 75 percent a year, according to the Certified Forest Products Council.

The Forest Stewardship Council is still devising regional standards. In the Northwest, the program has met with mixed success. The Collins Cos. of Portland have been certified, and company officials praise the program and are eager to see it expanded.

Other landowners have been hostile. Some of their criticism has surfaced in Northwest Woodlands, a journal that devoted most of its fall edition to certification.

"Certification programs should not tell us why we own forest land. . . . They should not prescribe a simplistic one-size-fits-all set of politically correct management," wrote Barte Starker, of Starker Forests in Oregon. "The intent seems to be to encourage passive activities . . . and include a strong bias against clear-cutting and chemical use."

The battle between the two certification systems probably will continue, but some retailers are hoping for common ground.

John Simley, a spokesman for Home Depot, said the industry standard shouldn't be taken lightly. He said he hopes differences can be resolved before the company favors certified products, in 2002.

But Debbie Hammel, who works with a group that certifies through the Forest Stewardship Council, said, "It's hard to see a single system. That may, in fact, happen at some point. But nowhere on the horizon that I can see now."

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