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COMMENTARY

Sustainable Forestry...With a Chainsaw?

By Jim Motavalli and Brian C. Howard

A moving counter on the home page of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) lets web surfers know that the program is responsible for saving more than 5.3 billion trees since it was launched in 1995. "Keeping our forests healthy is important," the group, launched as an offshoot of the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA) solemnly proclaims. "Healthy forests will continue to provide the wood and paper products that are vital to all of us while also ensuring that we have forests and wildlife for future generations of Americans."

SFI says it reforests more than a million acres each year. "Thanks to the hard work of the men and women working in our forests," says SFI, "we now have more forestland today than we did on the very first Earth Day in 1970." It's all about "responsible environmental practices."

Far from applauding this self-policing effort, environmentalists from the Dogwood Alliance, Greenpeace, Rainforest Action Network, ForestEthics and others just launched the "Don't Buy the SFI" campaign. Last September, the groups organized a demonstration outside SFI's annual meeting in Austin, Texas. What's the matter with these people? Are they never satisfied?

One of the Austin protesters, Melissa Stringfellow of the Texas-based environmental group SACRED, says, "I can't believe that the timber industry chooses to betray the American people's trust by slapping a green label on products that cause the destruction of endangered forests worldwide."

Scot Quaranda of the Dogwood Alliance, a longtime campaigner against southern plantation forestry, says SFI is pure greenwashing. "Its board is dominated by the timber industry," he says. "It's a classic case of foxes guarding the henhouse. SFI's principles allow old-growth forests to be logged, permit large-scale use of herbicides and do nothing to discourage clear-cutting. It's an empty marketing scheme."

In a full-page *New York Times* ad and other venues, the anti-SFI campaign points out that the forestry program permits native and natural forests to be replaced with single-species industrial tree plantations--the model in today's South. "Over the past few decades, SFI-sanctioned practices such as large-scale clearcutting, the conversion of forests to plantations and the industrial use of chemicals have compromised the biological integrity of much of the South's forestland," says William Eickmeier, a retired Vanderbilt University biology professor.

"How unsustainable can a timber company be and still qualify for SFI certification?" asks Scott Greacen of the Environmental Protection Information Center. "Maxxam/Pacific Lumber is a SFI-certified company and has become notorious for forest destruction and fouling clean water. Pacific Lumber's lax practices have led to dozens of criminal citations."

Daniel Hall of the American Lands Alliance adds that there's no guarantee that products marketed as 'SFI-certified' actually originate in SFI-certified forests. "It's anybody's guess as to what's actually in them," he said. "In fact, over half of SFI companies' wood doesn't even come from SFI forests, and there's no consumer warning when products contain non-SFI content." For its part, SFI says its label means "the facility that produced the product bearing the label is part of a program whose participants plant more than 1.7 million trees every day." That would seem to mean that the trees cut down to make the product were owned by an SFI member.

Last March, the Dogwood Alliance coordinated a letter signed by more than 90 Southern scientists calling for an overhaul of SFI's standards. The letter calls SFI "a misleading marketing and advertising tool" to convince customers that industrial forests are well managed.

"The flora of the Southeastern U.S. is extremely rich in biodiversity," said one of the letter's signatories, Dr. (Jenny) Qiuyun Xiang of North Carolina State University. "Clearcutting of natural forest communities from the region will undoubtedly reduce the abundance of these species, destroy the natural habitats of animal species associated with the communities, and threaten the biodiversity at all levels in this region."

SFI should not be confused with the similar-sounding Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which also certifies wood products. Although FSC has also borne the brunt of environmental criticism, the anti-SFI campaign says it "represents the minimum threshold for meaningful certification systems." Among other things the campaign points out: FSC is predominately funded by outside sources and governed independently of the companies being certified. FSC also prohibits the takeover of natural forests by plantations; requires old-growth protection in certified forests; and discourages intensive chemical use. FSC certifications are peer-reviewed, while SFI's are not.

SFI has its defenders. Forex Log and Lumber calls it "an exacting standard of environmental principles, objectives, and performance measures that link sustainable forestry with the protection of wildlife, plants, soil, water quality, historical, geological and cultural resources."

Brian Kozlowski, director of environment for the North American operations of Finland-based paper-making giant Stora Enso, argues, "In our view, neither FSC nor SFI is better than the other." Kozlowski says his company views both systems as credible, and adds, "Any of the many forestry certification systems around the world--in South America, Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere--that meet our standards have value." He says Stora Enso won't buy wood from "conservation areas," which he says include old growth, unless the region is part of a "sustainable plan."

The Eco-Labels project of Consumers Union (the publishers of the popular *Consumer Reports* magazine) considers SFI "somewhat meaningful." The label won points for having information on its standards publicly available, for having some transparency and for being independently verified

(SFI uses auditing firms such as Price Waterhouse Coopers and BioForest Technologies and has an advisory "Independent Expert Review Panel").

However, SFI lost points with the Eco-Labels project for having a lack of broad public input and other issues. "Some of the indicators are vague or very qualitative, which could limit the consistency of the label among certified forests," explains the Consumers Union. "For example, certified companies with research components can simply donate to themselves in order to meet the requirement for funding conservation research." Further, guidelines do not distinguish between plantations and old growth forests and genetic engineering is permitted. SFI claims to represent people outside the forest industry on its 15-person board, and it explains that by outsiders it means (in addition to a few environmentalists) "logging companies, trade associations and non-industrial working forests," reports the Consumers Union.

Not only is this bizarre word play that should shame even the harshest critic of former President Bill Clinton, but it is a conflict of interest according to the Consumers Union.

If you were impressed by SFI's claim that there is more forested land today than at the time of the first Earth Day in 1970, consider that industry's numbers count monolithic pine plantations as "forests." But Quaranda points out that pine plantations (three quarters of which were once covered in natural tree growth) are 95 to 99 percent less biologically diverse than natural forests. And while SFI member companies do indeed plant millions of acres in new seedlings, it's only good business practice. "You're talking about a 'forest' that is being planted just to be cut down 20 years later," Quaranda said.

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