
Forest Certification: Sustainable Forestry or Misleading Marketing?
Forest Certification Systems Still Not Created Equal
By: Daniel Hall - Thursday, May 5, 2005
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Introduction

Too often, industrial forestry in North America harms endangered forests, wildlife, and water quality, and reduces forests to barren tree plantations. But there are solutions. Corporate and individual consumers can support stronger resource protection policies, recycle, use wood and paper products more efficiently—and select products certified as originating from commercial forests managed to ecologically, socially, and economically exemplary standards.

In 1993, conservation organizations, forward-thinking wood products companies, and social interest groups created the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) to provide a certification system that would be ecologically and socially credible, economically practicable, and responsive to both international and local needs. Most conservationists still view the FSC as the threshold for credible certification. Nearly 125 million acres of forest are now FSC certified in 76 countries, including 13.6 million acres in the U.S.

While a number of wood products companies in the U.S. are FSC certified, others dug in their heels. In 1995, the timber industry's American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA) launched the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI). Originally designed as a public relations program, the SFI now also presents itself as a forest certification system. Faced with the FSC's growing success, the AF&PA claims the SFI is equally good.

While it has improved over time, the SFI remains much weaker than the FSC, and is still neither independent of vested timber interests, nor sufficiently protective of forest ecosystems and social values. The SFI's newly revised standards do little to close this credibility gap, and are unlikely to end the ecologically unsustainable practices used by many SFI certified companies, meaning the SFI will continue to mislead consumers about those companies' environmental impacts.

Competition Amongst Unequals

Previous comparisons of the FSC and SFI found significant differences in the two systems. In 2001, the independent Meridian Institute's "Comparative Analysis of the Forest Stewardship Council and Sustainable Forestry Initiative Certification Programs" found the FSC and SFI differed substantially in virtually all areas.¹ It was also apparent that only the FSC: was independent of the timber industry; required verification of compliance with all relevant laws; covered a broad range of environmental and social concerns; and focused on exemplary forest management, including by protecting old growth and prohibiting replacement of forests with plantations.

In 2004, the Forests & European Union Resource Network (FERN) released "Footprints in the Forest: Current Practice and Future Challenges in Forest Certification."² The report examined eight certification systems from around the globe. While the report raised concerns with all the systems, FERN found the FSC "remains by far the most independent, rigorous and, therefore, credible certification system" and "only the FSC...deserves the confidence of consumers." FERN found the SFI "[is] probably one of the least credible of all schemes researched" and fails to rely on performance based standards, consult with stakeholders, and use chain-of-custody product tracking.

The book *Governing Through Markets: Forest Certification and the Emergence of Non-State Authority* (Yale University Press, 2004) also found important differences between the FSC and SFI, including their standards for plantations, clearcuts, genetically modified organisms, and ecological reserves.

The Emperor's New Clothes

Both the FSC and SFI continue to update their standards. The SFI's new January, 2005, standards contain some limited improvements, including recognition of the need to protect water quality and imperiled species from chemicals. Previous changes also provided improvements to the SFI's provisions for water quality, tropical wilderness areas, and the certification process, among other things.³

However, the revised SFI standards are more notable for their continued gaps. The SFI continues to lack important elements of more credible systems like the FSC—including in six areas vital to credible certification of industrial forests in the U.S.⁴

1. Independence and Balanced Governance

The FSC achieves both relevance to, and independence from, forestry interests through a standards development and governance system that vests equal control in three membership chambers: environmental, social, and economic. The FSC is also predominantly funded by independent sources.

Conversely, the SFI's standards were originally written by the AF&PA, and can only be changed with agreement from the AF&PA companies and other forestry interests that comprise two-thirds of the SFI's Board. The SFI is funded primarily by the AF&PA and its member companies. The AF&PA also controls the SFI's labeling and marketing programs, and staffs some other SFI programs.

2. Forest and Environmental Protection Standards

Only the FSC:

- o Requires management for natural forest attributes and ecosystem function at meaningful levels.
- o Prohibits replacement of natural forests by ecologically-barren tree plantations, and requires significant portions of existing plantations to be managed more naturally.
- o Establishes meaningful limits on large-scale clearcutting.
- o Requires protection measures for rare old growth in certified forests, and consistently requires protection of other high conservation value forests.
- o Requires and consistently implements on-the-ground protection of all imperiled, threatened, and endangered species.
- o Encourages forest practices that reduce the need for routine, intensive chemical use, and bans the most toxic chemicals.
- o Prohibits replacement of forests by sprawl and other non-forest land uses.
- o Clearly prohibits logging levels that exceed forest growth levels.
- o Prohibits use of genetically modified trees and other genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

3. Community Protection Standards

Only the FSC consistently protects indigenous peoples' rights, requires workers to be paid competitive wages, and requires reinvestment in local communities. Equally important, only the FSC explicitly requires verification of compliance with social and international laws and policies.

4. Truth-in-Labeling and Product Content Monitoring

Only the FSC requires chain-of-custody monitoring and tracking of certified products, to ensure the accuracy of labeling and marketing claims. And only the FSC requires labels and other claims to disclose any non-certified content in products.

5. Certification and Accreditation Process

Only the FSC uses standards that emphasize specific ecological outcomes and other “on-the-ground” requirements, rather than mere existence of company programs/plans that can have widely varying objectives. And only the FSC relies heavily on standards that inherently require field audits to determine compliance, and prohibits companies from modifying the standards used to certify them.

6. Transparency and Public Participation

Only the FSC requires stakeholder notification and consultation during certification audits, requires peer review of all certification decisions, and is transparent in its governance.

Conclusion

“Sustainable forestry” will be a hollow phrase if it does not sustain the ecosystems that comprise forests and ultimately support human uses. Likewise, forest certification can be a powerful means for corporate and individual consumers to increase the sustainability of forest management in the U.S. and abroad—but only if certification systems are credible and environmentally rigorous.

The SFI remains heavily influenced by the AF&PA and its member companies. As a result, even its revised standards do not adequately protect imperiled forest ecosystems, or reverse the reduction of natural forests to barren tree plantations. The SFI still allows companies to log rare old growth and imperiled species’ habitats, clearcut and spray toxic chemicals across entire landscapes, and use other harmful (yet “routine”) forestry practices.⁵

The FSC remains the threshold for credible forest certification. Until other systems close their credibility gaps, businesses and individual consumers interested in reducing their ecological “footprint” should look beyond the rhetoric—and give preference to wood and paper products from FSC certified forests.

Notes

1. The Meridian Institute report is at <http://www.merid.org/comparison/>.
2. The FERN report is at www.fern.org.
3. Detailed analyses of the SFI and its revised standards are at <http://www.americanlands.org/reports.php>. See “Update on the AF&PA Sustainable Forestry Initiative: Analysis of Changes,” January, 2005, and “A Review of the American Forest & Paper Association’s Sustainable Forestry Initiative,” November, 2003.
4. This analysis focuses on the FSC and SFI standards for private commercial forests in the U.S., i.e., the region where the two systems are most comparable. Both the SFI standards and the FSC US Regional Standards were developed with such forests in mind. Elsewhere, the SFI uses the same standards, while the FSC uses different Regional Standards to address other countries’ unique situations. The FSC US also recognizes that standards for private commercial forests are not sufficient for National Forests and other federal public lands in the U.S. The SFI standards are at www.aboutsfi.org. The FSC standards for the U.S. are at <http://www.fscus.org/documents/index.php>.
5. Examples of SFI certified companies’ harmful practices are at www.dontbuysfi.com.

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