



Green Building Standards Factsheet: *Green Globes' Lack of Environmental Credibility*

Independent and credible building standards like the “Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design” (LEED) standards of the US Green Building Council (USGBC) have the potential to encourage more environmentally sound design and construction of commercial and residential buildings. Among other things, LEED gives credit to builders who use wood from forests certified by the independent Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

Unfortunately, far less credible green building systems like “Green Globes” also exist. Such systems may mislead builders, consumers, and others into thinking that business-as-usual industrial logging and other questionable practices are environmentally sustainable. Although Green Globes’ lack of transparency makes it difficult to evaluate, the system clearly lacks independence, and rewards environmentally destructive forestry practices, rather than encouraging more balanced and sustainable practices.

Is Green Globes’ Independent and Balanced?

According to some observers, Green Globes is controlled by wood and plastics industry trade groups, and homebuilder associations that favor business-as-usual practices. While Green Globes fails to disclose much about itself, what information is available confirms that Green Globes and its parent organization lack independence and balance in their governance and funding.

Green Globes was introduced to the US by the Green Building Initiative (GBI), which retains control over the system. The GBI is operated by Ward Hubbell, a former executive with the Louisiana Pacific Corp., a wood products company formerly known for controversial practices.¹ According to its website, the GBI “...was originally conceived as a way to bring green building into the mainstream helping local Home Builder Associations (HBAs) develop green building programs modeled after the National Association of Home Builders’ (NAHB) Model Green Home Building Guidelines.”²

The GBI website describes the GBI board as representing “industries, builders, developers, academics, non-governmental organizations, and others with an interest in green building.” However, the board’s composition is slanted towards industry and builders, and contains no non-profit organizations dedicated to protecting forests or the environment more generally.³ No information is available on how the board is selected. The GBI’s members are also undisclosed, and do not have a vote on GBI policy matters.

The GBI also does not disclose its funding. However, the GBI website notes that “[t]he GBI has benefited from the early support of a core group of industries.... Organizations like the Wood Promotion Network, as well as interests from... financial services, retailers, wholesalers, appliance manufacturers, and other building material providers....”⁴ Other observers indicate that “[t]he GBI is bankrolled by the North American Green Building Coalition, which was founded largely to lobby against the Green Building

Council's LEED Rating System, and operates at the direction of anti-environmental trade groups including the American Forest & Paper Association, American Plastics Council, and the Vinyl Institute."⁵

Does Green Globes Protect Endangered Forests and Other Environmental Values?

While Green Globes' standards are not publicly disclosed, available information suggests they reward builders for using wood from the destruction of Endangered Forests, and from other ecologically unsustainable forestry practices. Along with other sources, a published statement from Ward Hubbell indicates that Green Globes endorses and rewards the use of wood products from forests certified by virtually any forest certification system, including the "Sustainable Forestry Initiative" (SFI) of the American Forest & Paper Association (SFI), the forestry certification system of the Canadian Standards Association (CSA), and the American Tree Farm system.⁶ While credible forest certification systems do exist, the SFI, CSA, and Tree Farm systems lack independence and environmentally protective standards, and certify unacceptable forestry practices.

As evidenced by its standards and the practices of some SFI certified companies, the SFI allows ecologically damaging and business-as-usual logging practices such as:

- Widespread logging of irreplaceable old growth forests, roadless areas, and other Endangered Forests.
- Destruction of imperiled, threatened, and endangered species' habitats.
- Logging, road construction, and other operations that harm water quality, particularly in states that lack adequate "best management practices."
- Destruction of natural forests for replacement by ecologically degraded industrial tree plantations.
- Permanent conversion of forests to sprawl and other non-forest land uses.
- Excessive, routine use of toxic chemicals across entire landscapes.
- Excessive clearcutting, with entire landscapes allowed to be logged in very short time periods by multiple cuts each as large as 116 soccer fields.
- Use of genetically modified trees.

The SFI also:

- Does not adequately protect the rights of workers, communities, and indigenous peoples.
- Does not consistently and adequately require independent verification of companies' compliance with relevant laws and policies.
- Does not require adequate consultation with stakeholders and experts during assessments.

The American Tree Farm system lacks many basic institutional and procedural components of a fully functional certification system. Its standards also allow ecologically damaging logging practices. For example, Tree Farm:

- Does not require landowners to manage for natural forest conditions.
- Does not require landowners to consistently protect and help recover imperiled fish, wildlife, and plants.
- Does not require strong aquatic protection when states' "best management practices" are weak.
- Does not limit timber harvest levels to timber growth levels.
- Does not provide adequate limits on the use of toxic chemicals.
- Does not protect old growth and other Endangered Forests.
- Does not protect forests from conversion to tree plantations or non-forest land uses.
- Does not protect the rights of workers, communities, or indigenous peoples.

Likewise, as of mid-2004, the CSA had:

- No meaningful requirements to protect old growth forests.
- Very weak requirements for the protection of water quality.
- Very weak requirements for the protection of imperiled, threatened, and endangered species.
- No meaningful requirements to limit clearcutting and/or grow mature trees.
- No meaningful requirements to limit the use of toxic chemicals.
- No protections against the conversion of forests to tree plantations and/or sprawl.
- Little focus on “on-the-ground” performance.
- Inadequate requirements for the protection of workers and indigenous peoples’ rights.

The SFI, Tree Farm, and CSA also lack independence and balance in their governance. The SFI’s standards, for example, were originally developed by the wood products industry and forest landowners. Timber interests continue to dominate the SFI’s funding, management, standard setting, and label policies. Tree Farm suffers from similar problems, and also does not require certification by independent assessors.

The credibility of these systems’ market claims is also questionable. Over half of SFI companies’ wood/fiber comes from non-SFI certified forests, yet the SFI allows its label to be used on products containing little SFI certified input, without disclosure of the products’ real contents. Nor does the SFI require companies to verify the certified content of their products.

In contrast, the USGBC LEED system rewards builders who use wood from forests certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). The FSC is fundamentally more independent and environmentally and socially rigorous than the SFI, Tree Farm, and CSA, and generally does not suffer from the problems listed above. The LEED system generally allows, but does not reward or endorse, use of non-FSC certified wood.

The GBI’s Hubbell claims that “[t]he credibility and effectiveness of the SFI, Tree Farm, and CSA programs have been widely documented by...organizations such as the Meridian Institute...”⁷ However, the Meridian Institute’s comparison of the FSC and SFI explicitly stated that the two systems differed substantially in virtually all areas. The comparison also demonstrated that only the FSC possessed numerous attributes important for a forest certification program.⁸

For more detail on problems with the SFI, see the factsheets, reports, and photos at www.dontbuysfi.com. For more detail on problems with the Tree Farm system, see Section IX of the report entitled “A Review of the American Forest & Paper Association’s Sustainable Forestry Initiative” at www.dontbuysfi.com.

Were Green Globes’ Standards Developed Through Independent and Balanced Processes?

The GBI and Green Globes websites provide virtually no information on the specific process and criteria used to develop Green Globes. But there is little basis for concluding that Green Globes’ provisions were developed through a genuinely consensus based, multistakeholder process. The US version of Green Globes is based on the Canadian Green Globes system. According to the Green Globes website, Green Globes Canada was developed “...with the support of federal and provincial ministries and public utilities...”⁹ No mention is made of non-profit forest protection and conservation organizations having been involved in the process. Changes made to the Green Globes system to make it more applicable to the US

appear to be both superficial (see below) and controlled primarily by the GBI. Hubbell also described the GBI as “fast, affordable, flexible, and less cumbersome. And no one knows how it works.”¹⁰

Is Green Globes’ Assessment Process Independent?

Green Globes’ assessments are largely based on first-party self-reporting, rather than independent third-party verification. According to a primary Green Globes website, Green Globe’s “...questionnaires and reports provide a self-assessment, reporting tool, and design guide all-in-one,” with the questionnaire “...reduc[ing] the need for third-party involvement...”¹¹ While Green Globes’ questionnaire and rating system are not publicly disclosed, one observer found that 70% of the points in the system’s assessment are derived through self-reported answers on a checklist, with third-party oversight and evaluation of builders’ reports appearing to be minimal.

Is Green Globes Applicable to the US?

Because of Green Globes’ lack of transparency, it is difficult to determine how applicable its standards are to the US. However, Green Globes’ standards were developed for use in Canada, and have only been superficially revised since being introduced in the US. According to the GBI, “...the only changes made to the US version were non-substantive—e.g., units of measurement or changing Canadian references to US references.”¹²

Notes

¹ LP’s controversial practices included harmful logging in California and the Tongass National Forest, alleged tampering of pollution monitoring equipment in Colorado, and alleged fraud relating to the quality of some of its products. The pollution and fraud charges are discussed in a series of articles by *The Oregonian*, including “Besieged LP Has Deep Pockets,” June 4, 1995.

² www.thegbi.com.

³ www.thegbi.com/commercial/greenglobes/faqs.htm.

⁴ www.thegbi.com/home/origin.asp.

⁵ *Healthy Building News*, July 19, 2005, Healthy Building Network, Washington DC.

⁶ “Interview with Ward Hubbell,” May 2005, *SFI Monthly*, Sustainable Forestry Initiative.

⁷ “Interview with Ward Hubbell,” May 2005, *SFI Monthly*, Sustainable Forestry Initiative.

⁸ A close reading of the Meridian Institute’s 2001 *Comparative Analysis of the Forest Stewardship Council and Sustainable Forestry Initiative Certification Programs* shows that only the FSC: was largely independent of the wood products industry; was governed by a balance of environmental, social, and economic interests; addressed a broad range of environmental and social concerns; was designed to recognize exemplary forest management; explicitly required verification of compliance with all relevant laws; addressed the rights of workers and indigenous peoples, and community relations; prohibited logging that exceeds timber growth; prohibited conversion of natural forests to plantations; required protection of old growth and high conservation value forests; explicitly required protection of rare, threatened, and endangered species; required minimal use of herbicides; prohibited use of genetically modified species and restricted use of invasive exotic species; required landowners to assess their impacts; consistently required third-party audits; had a formal system to accredit certifiers; consistently required public consultation for program development and certification audits; required peer review of certification decisions; consistently required public summaries of certification decisions; and precluded use of labels and logos where forests are not third-party certified. Many such differences remain.

⁹ www.greenglobes.com/faq.htm.

¹⁰ “LEED Gets Green Globes Competition,” *Daily Journal of Commerce*, www.djoregon.com/section/grnblgd/leed.html.

¹¹ www.greenglobes.com/faq.htm.

¹² “Interview with Ward Hubbell,” May 2005, *SFI Monthly*, Sustainable Forestry Initiative.