



THE PINCHOT LETTER

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Forest Certification and the National Forest System

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Wood is one of the finest and most versatile materials known. More energy-efficient than steel and other alternatives, wood use results in fewer greenhouse gases and other harmful emissions (Petersen and Solberg 2003). Moreover, wood is renewable and its use is compatible with management of forests for a variety of ecosystem services—but only if it originates in forests that are sustainably managed.

And there's the rub. In the 1990s, there was a worldwide net loss of forestland equivalent to the area of Italy and France combined (FAO 2005). Most of the loss was due to land use conversion to agriculture, but global markets for wood also contributed through unsustainable (and often illegal) logging. How do we know whether the wood we use is coming from sustainably managed forests?

That's where certification comes in. Certification identifies forestland that is managed according to well-recognized standards of sustainability. Products that originate from certified forests can be labeled for sale, giving buyers confidence that their purchases are environmentally responsible. Forest landowners benefit in turn from green-labeling market opportunities, and other forest stakeholders can also benefit: Under some certification schemes, forest users and forest-dependent communities have a seat at the table in assessing the quality of forest management, where formerly they might have felt left out.

Around the world, people have recognized the benefits, and certification has grown by leaps and bounds. From virtually zero in the early 1990s, certification has

grown to cover much of the private timberland in Western Europe and North America. However, only 7 percent of the world's forests are certified (Davis 2007), and many countries with forests that are not certified face threats from illegal logging, government corruption, or unsustainable forestry practices. A number of forest-product-consuming countries—including the United States—purchase products from overseas forests that might not be managed sustainably.

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Certification—an entirely voluntary market approach—can be a powerful tool in meeting such threats. The Forest Service has supported efforts in countries around the world to promote sustainable forestry practices, from reduced-impact logging to increased law enforcement. Certification has been introduced in such countries as Brazil, Indonesia, Madagascar, and Mexico to help sustain forests and reduce illegal logging. In 1997, to be fully credible in encouraging other countries to adopt forest certification, the Forest Service began exploring the possibility of forest certification for the lands it manages, the National Forest System.

In fact, national forest management might benefit from forest certification. A number of states, counties, and municipalities have found it to be useful, and about 14 million acres of state land in the United States are now certified. Certification programs have helped guide forest policy and management and improve communication with the public. Quite apart from global forestry considerations, certification for the National Forest System might be a good idea.

Leadership in Forest Conservation Thought, Policy and Action



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ABOUT THE PINCHOT INSTITUTE

Recognized as a leader in forest conservation thought, policy and action, the Pinchot Institute for Conservation was dedicated in 1963 by President John F. Kennedy at Grey Towers National Historic Landmark (Milford, PA)—home of conservation leader Gifford Pinchot. The Institute is an independent nonprofit organization that works collaboratively with all Americans nationwide—from federal and state policymakers to citizens in rural communities—to strengthen forest conservation by advancing sustainable forest management, developing conservation leaders, and providing science-based solutions to emerging natural resource issues. Further information about the Pinchot Institute’s programs and activities can be found at www.pinchot.org.

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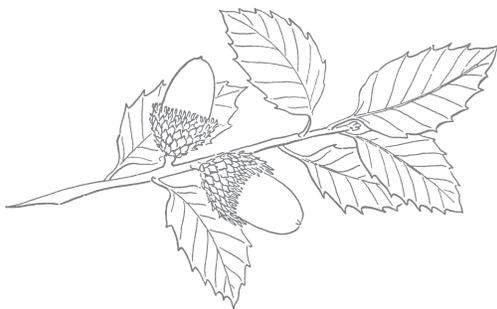


To test its potential, the Forest Service asked the Pinchot Institute for Conservation to explore the application of certification systems on national forest land. The Institute worked with accredited auditors to investigate management practices on five units in the National Forest System using protocols developed by two leading forest certification systems—the Forest Stewardship Council and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. The protocols reflect how well landowners meet their own management standards in addition to standards set by each system.

Completed in 2007, the assessments showed that all five study units met or exceeded most of the certification requirements under the two systems. The assessments also provided valuable insight into common challenges facing national forest managers, such as unmanaged off-highway vehicle use, road maintenance backlogs, and the need for more active forest management to minimize insect and disease problems and reduce hazardous fuels. Although the Forest Service is well aware of such issues, forest certification would likely require some thoughtful and deliberate management actions, some perhaps at the national level.

The Forest Service is carefully weighing the tradeoffs before making a decision. The United States already has the most comprehensive laws and regulations for forest management in the world, and the national forests and grasslands are already managed in a transparent public process. Certification would require the Forest Service to take a number of steps that might include adding new procedures to management systems that are already fairly process-heavy.

However, professional third-party assessments could be a valuable addition to Forest Service auditing procedures and quality control. They could also help the general public better understand and assess the policies and procedures used in managing the National Forest System. The small community enterprises that depend on material from national forests, especially in the West, would benefit from access to emerging markets for certified forest products. In addition, adopting certification for the National Forest System would set a powerful example for private landowners and other countries.



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The Forest Service is evaluating such considerations in deciding whether to adopt certification. The next step will be listening sessions with interested parties to promote a broader and deeper dialogue on the certification of federal lands. Whatever the agency's ultimate decision, forest certification is here to stay. Certification enjoys strong support from a range of stakeholders, including consumer groups, wood producers and retailers, and governments around the world. It holds promise for promoting sustainable forest management and building green markets on a global scale, with benefits for generations to come.

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