

PERSPECTIVES

National Forest Management: How Are We Doing?

V. Alaric Sample

When he was serving as New York City's mayor, Ed Koch was known to occasionally take to the streets of Gotham, stopping citizens at random to ask, "How am I doing?" Two years ago when Forest Service leaders approached the Pinchot Institute about evaluating the management on five case study National Forests to the existing certification standards, they were essentially asking the same thing. As Forest Service Associate Chief Sally Collins notes in the accompanying article, the agency is increasingly aware that independent certification is becoming a fixture in forestry elsewhere in the world, a necessary step to reassure both citizens that their forests were being well managed. As Forest Service leaders made clear to Pinchot Institute researchers at the time, the agency had no plans to seek actual certification, or even to determine if a National Forest was potentially "certifiable." They wanted to know "how they were doing," compared to two widely accepted sets of standards for sustainable forest management.

Managers of public forestlands in the United States have had a tough couple of years—several decades, in fact. Once highly regarded by the general public as firefighting heroes and conservation leaders, managers of public forests starting taking heat themselves in the 1960s and 1970s over issues such as clearcutting, herbicide use, and wilderness protection. In the 1980s and 1990s, a string of lawsuits over impacts on endangered species and old-growth forests brought timber harvesting to a virtual standstill on many public forests in the US.

Some of the highest profile controversies focused on the National Forests, a century-old, 193 million acre system of federal forest reserves managed by the US Forest Service. Public trust in forest managers hit an all-time low, and there were few proposed timber harvests or other management activities that were not halted or delayed by administrative appeals and citizen lawsuits.

Meanwhile, worldwide concern over large-scale deforestation in the tropics prompted the development of programs for independent third-party certification of wood produced from sustainably managed forests. The objective was to enable consumers, especially in tropical wood-importing nations, to consciously choose wood products that would not contribute to further exploitation and unsustainable management of tropical forests. With cooperation from leaders in forest industry as well as conservation organizations, forest certification programs were developed to (1) create a list of criteria for sound forest management, (2) establish independent audit processes to

No longer were forest industry and environmental activities simply locked in a legal and policy stalemate over whether timber harvesting could take place, but how it could take place while ensuring that it is ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible.

determine in the field whether a given forest management enterprise is following these criteria, and (3) provide a mechanism for tracing products from a certified forest through manufacturing and distribution all the way to the consumer, so the consumer can be certain that that wood or paper product they are purchasing did indeed come from a sustainably managed forest.

This represented an important breakthrough in the contentious arena of forest conservation. No longer were forest industry and environmental activists simply locked in a legal and policy stalemate over *whether* timber harvesting could take place, but *how* it could take place while ensuring that it is ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. These developments also held out the promise of calming some of the public controversy around forest management, by providing citizens with credible assurances that the forests in question were not being over-exploited, and adequate protection was being provided for forest areas of exceptional importance for conservation values such as biodiversity, wildlife habitat or water quality.

In his best selling book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jared Diamond writes that "the essence of [certification] is that consumers can believe it, because it is not an unsubstantiated boast by the company itself but the result of an examina-

tion, against internationally accepted standards of best practice, by trained and experienced auditors who don't hesitate to say no or to impose conditions."

In 1996, the Pinchot Institute embarked on a long-term research project to see whether certification programs—originally developed to guide forest management and timber harvesting by private companies—could also help improve forest management on public lands designated to protect a wider array of natural resource and environmental values. The first major project involved the independent audit of the entire 2.1 million acre state forest system in Pennsylvania. Based on this evaluation, some important corrective actions were needed, and the necessary actions were taken. Today, Pennsylvania's state forest lands are the world's largest single body of certified forest—more than 3,000 square miles (8,400 square kilometers). More importantly, it is widely acknowledged by conservation organizations, forest industry, and state forestry agency officials themselves that these public forests are being better managed now, and much of the past legal and policy controversy has subsided.

This report describes the results of independent audits of five units of the National Forest System ranging from 500,000 to 1.5 million acres in size. This case study is the culmination of what has become a ten-year research project that ultimately involved forest certification audits on state forestlands in seven states, 30 areas of Native Amer-

*There now begins what
we hope will be a
positive, constructive
and genuinely
productive national
dialogue on the potential
value of forest
certification on public
forest lands.*

ican tribal forestlands, and one national park. It should be noted that, in each case, the independent audits identified needs for corrective actions, and in each case these were successfully addressed by the agencies' forest managers. A general conclusion among the agencies themselves is that the reduction in costs associated with public controversy and legal challenges—not only on agency budgets but on the spirit and morale of their forest managers—more than offset the time and expense associated with the certification process.

Whether this will be true of the U.S. national forests, only time will tell. Decades of often bitter controversy are not easily forgotten or set aside. Nevertheless, there now begins what we hope will be a positive, constructive and genuinely productive national dialogue on the potential value of forest certification on public forest lands—for improving the protection and sustainable management of these lands for a variety of values and uses, and for making them models of sound forest management to guide and inspire managers of other types of forest throughout the country and around the world.

It is our hope that the results of this study and the analysis contained in the report will inform and enrich that national dialogue, and help lead to a stronger broad-based consensus on the conservation and sustainable management of America's public forests.

