

# Why All the Fuss About Forest Certification?

Will Price

Program Associate

Pinchot Institute for Conservation

*"It is a matter of what a man  
thinks about while chopping, or  
while deciding what to chop."*

*Aldo Leopold,  
A Sand County Almanac*

Over the past few years the Pinchot Institute conducted major projects involving state and tribal government that are interested in certification for their forestland holdings. We worked with forest management agencies in five states, 30 tribes, and two universities to pilot test certification on their lands, affording the land managers experience with certification and a chance to become certified. The main objective of these projects has been to test certification in these settings, and evaluate whether two of the major certification programs in the U.S. are viable and valuable for these landowners.

These efforts have attracted a lot of attention in the areas where they took place, and sometimes resonated throughout the forest products industry. The "dual assessment" projects as we have called them, have sometimes been highly politicized, yet they have delivered many insights and great value to the participants. They have also affected the prominence and familiarity of certification as a conservation tool, especially for public and tribal forest managers. Considering our work on certification began five years ago, it is a good time to describe the evolution of certification programs, and the challenges ahead as they continue to evolve and encompass a greater portion of the forest estate in the U.S.

## WHAT IS FOREST CERTIFICATION?

Forest management certification is a process that developed to recognize and promote environmentally responsible forestry and the sustainability of forest resources. Certification relies on natural resource professionals to conduct forest management assessments by evaluating management plans and observing actual conditions in the forest. There are a number of private certification programs in operation that seek to identify and reward well managed forestland by measuring forest management practices against various sets of standards. In this way, certification intends to provide credible assurance that certified forests, and the wood products derived from them, reflect a process that supports the stewardship of an entire forest ecosystem. This responsibility calls for forest landowners and managers to pay attention to social and economic welfare as well as environmental protection.

Forest management certification arose as a non-regulatory alternative for fostering the improved stewardship of working forestlands. While there are many regulations governing forest management — particularly in the United States — certification provides a private incentive to encourage landowner commitment to sustainable forest management. It also offers a stamp of approval for forest management practices that meet standards considered to be environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable.

Forest management certification

as we now recognize it, emerged in the late 1980s as a means of promoting the sound management of tropical rainforests, where widespread deforestation and poor harvest practices were occurring. Since then, certification has broadened in scope to include the management of many types of forests (in fact, over 80% of the forests that are certified today are temperate or boreal).

## HOW DID CERTIFICATION ORIGINATE?

The history of forest certification in the United States and throughout the world cannot be separated from the evolution of the concepts, practices, and institutionalization of *sustainable forest management*. Throughout history, people managing land, whether as individuals or communities, for companies, or for kings, have wondered how natural resources are best used and sustained over the long term. This type of thought has occasionally given birth to intricate systems for maximizing the yield of desired forest products over multiple generations of trees and people. Early societies such as the Mayans in Mexico and the Acehnese of Indonesia developed silvicultural techniques to sustain and maximize yield over the long-term for many tree crops. At the time, the extent of forests on the European continent was shrinking. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Germans and the French introduced formalized training and management systems to their silvicultural (or "tree-culture") practice. At the heart of this training was the notion that the forest could be managed in perpetuity. The earliest foresters in the U.S. studied at

European academics and introduced these management approaches at home. Prominent among them was Gifford Pinchot, who trained in France, and then was the first to formally apply the craft in the U.S. when he prepared a comprehensive forestry plan for the Vanderbilt estate in North Carolina. These management systems were focused on a set of the conditions necessary for consistent yield of wood products (e.g. soil productivity, water, and other factors affecting growing conditions).

A global outcry over the decline in extent and quality of forested ecosystems has occurred over the last half of the 20th century, and the call to encourage responsible stewardship has emerged worldwide. These concerns were raised in multiple International forums, where country representatives sought mechanisms to halt the destruction of tropical forests, and improve the overall treatment of the world's forest estate. Perhaps the most pivotal of these gatherings was the United Nations Conference and the Environment and Development

(UNCED) in 1992. The Rio Earth Summit prompted a set of international guidelines for sustainability. Called *principles* and *criteria*, these guidelines encapsulated the scope of issues that should be considered when evaluating forest management. Setting them to paper provided a universal template for the new market mechanisms that were emerging.

These guidelines capture today's broader definition of sustainability. Though still very dynamic, the definition has expanded to address the health of the entire forest ecosystem and the vitality of people involved and associated with managed forests. Forest certification has become the tool that distills these broad concepts of sustainable management into measurable guidelines that can be verified and then communicated to a world market.

#### HOW DOES CERTIFICATION WORK IN THE UNITED STATES?

In March of 1993 the Almanor forest in California, successfully com-

pleted a certification assessment under the guidelines of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), becoming the first forest *certified* in the United States. However, at the time there were already sustainable forest management programs in the United States, which evaluated their members based on principles of sustainable forest management similar to those developed at the UNCED. Several of these programs have now added a formal certification process, incorporating third-party auditing and a label that represents their claims in the market. For them certification was a natural next step, giving their long-standing forest stewardship programs recognition in the marketplace. The longest-operating program of this kind is the American Tree Farm System, which has been enrolling and inspecting members for 60 years. The two other systems in the United States that transitioned from forest stewardship programs to certification systems include Green Tag and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI).

As of May 1, 2003 over 76 million

Green Tag Guiding Principles	FSC Principles	Categories of Standards/ Guidelines and Performance Measures for the American Tree Farm System	SFI Program objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forest Planning and Management</li> <li>• Forest Health, Inventory, and Natural Diversity</li> <li>• Logging, Post-Harvest Evaluation and Reforestation</li> <li>• Road Construction, Stream Crossings, and Protection of Special Sites</li> <li>• Product Utilization and Aesthetics</li> <li>• Chemical Utilization</li> <li>• Community and Social Relations</li> <li>• Economic Viability</li> <li>• Record Keeping and Tracking</li> <li>• Commitment to Sustainability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compliance with laws and FSC principles</li> <li>• Tenure and Use Rights and Responsibilities</li> <li>• Indigenous Peoples' Rights</li> <li>• Community Relations and Worker's Rights</li> <li>• Benefits From the Forest</li> <li>• Environmental Impact</li> <li>• Management Plan</li> <li>• Monitoring and Assessment</li> <li>• Maintenance of High Conservation Value Forests</li> <li>• Plantation Management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring sustainable forests</li> <li>• Reforestation</li> <li>• Water quality</li> <li>• Wildlife habitat</li> <li>• Forest aesthetics</li> <li>• Protect special sites</li> <li>• Biodiversity</li> <li>• Slash disposal and utilization</li> <li>• Prudent use of chemicals</li> <li>• Forest contractor use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadening the practice of Sustainable forestry</li> <li>• Ensuring prompt Reforestation</li> <li>• Protecting water quality</li> <li>• Enhancing wildlife habitat</li> <li>• Minimizing the visual impact of harvesting</li> <li>• Protecting special sites</li> <li>• Contributing to biodiversity</li> <li>• Continuing improvements in wood utilization</li> <li>• Continuing the prudent use of forest chemicals to help ensure forest health</li> </ul>

acres, or 31 million hectares of forestland in the United States were independently third party certified as a sustainably managed forest under the American Tree Farm System® (ATFS), Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Green Tag, and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) program. The wood arriving from the forestlands certified by each of these programs sit on shelves together, often indistinguishable. Even if you wanted to buy from only one program, it would be difficult to find that program's wood in your local store, or you would not be able to tell whose it was. However they are different and they do have different labels to represent them in the market.

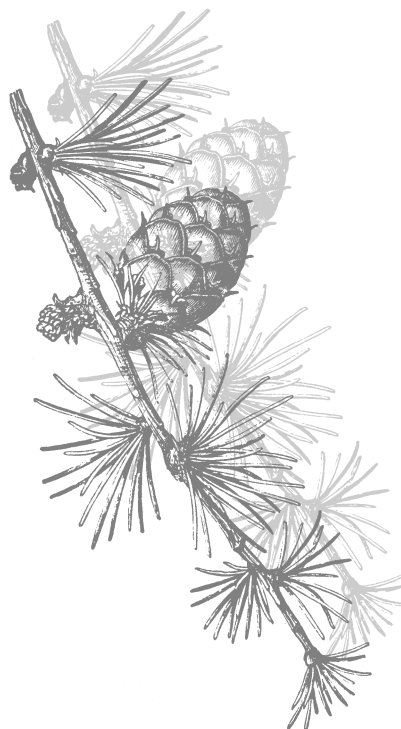
#### HOW DO THESE CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS DIFFER?

At their core, all certification programs seek to assure consumers that wood certified by their program is, according to the best available science, from sustainably managed forests. However, owing to their disparate origin and differences in membership, the certification programs in the United States differ in what they require of their participants. Even a cursory look of the main principles or objectives suggests that there are differences in how the standards are structured, the scope of the issues they address, and the specificity of the guidance they offer. For example, the FSC system addresses a broader array of socially-oriented concerns, especially regarding the rights of indigenous peoples on forestlands.

At the end of the day, their differences are points of contention and a basis for competition—and by their own account have driven improvements in all the programs. Market competition has always been the dominant feature of the U.S. forest products industry—and environmental performance is now another dimension of competitiveness.

#### THE FUTURE OF CERTIFICATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the certification programs in the United States is succeeding in reaching more wood growers that are willing and able to adopt the requirements of certification programs. In the U.S., the majority of the timber that is harvested belongs to non-industrial private forest landowners (i.e. private landowners without mills). In the U.S. approximately 2.4 million landowners own



more than 10 acres (and more than 7 million more own less than 10 acres.) The average ownership period is only ten years. With the sheer number of landowners forming the base of the timber supply in the United States, it will always be a major undertaking to verify whether sustainable practices are followed. This has been a challenge for public programs in the United States for some time now, and will continue to be a challenge certification programs as they seek to enlarge their market-share.

These differences in origin have

implications for how each system will credibly expand participation in their program. From the start FSC certification required a “chain-of-custody” system, tracking wood in specific quantities from a certified forest to the retailer's shelf. An FSC-certified retailer sources wood from a certified processor (mill or manufacturer), who sources wood from a certified forest.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) principally considered the forests of American Forest and Paper Association members and licensees. However, SFI program participants are now developing systems that can tell how much of the wood co-mingling in their mills is from forests managed in a manner consistent with a SFI procurement standard.<sup>2</sup> The American Tree Farm System (ATFS), which is 60 years old and 65,000 landowners strong, is composed of landowners who belong by virtue of their adherence to a broad set of principles. Among other changes necessary to become recognized as a source for certified wood, ATFS is strengthening the system for verifying whether members follow these principles.

In the Southeast, SmartWood is currently promoting a “group certification” approach—wherein either a set of landowners organized in a cooperative seek certification together, or a resource manager (typically a forester or consulting firm) achieves certification for a portfolio of clients (i.e. Certified Resource Manager). As a system geared for larger and often industrial landowners, SFI certified companies are aggressively working to improve procurement systems. Firms like PriceWaterhouseCoopers are also honing their methods for auditing the supply chain for SFI-certified wood. Meanwhile Tree Farm, which has already been described by SFI as an *appropriate* system for smaller landowners, is seeking to strengthen their system. The steps to required to gain international recognition as a

certification program would involve system-wide changes affecting thousands of members.

At first glance, and maybe in the final analysis, it seems these systems have complementary strengths: one introduces a standard seeking a wide range of consumer values in forestry, another can adapt these values to the complexity of the world's largest wood products infrastructure, and a third has a grassroots-oriented connection with the thousands of smaller producers that grow the bulk of our nation's trees. The rapid growth and evolution of the certification programs in the United States over the last few years suggests that the differences will be bridged and future challenges will be surmounted. Many questions remain over how the various programs in the U.S. will function in the marketplace. However, their role in linking trade in forest products with responsible stewardship should continue to compel improvements in forest management. In doing so, certification will help assure that the value of products cultivated in forests of the United States will only reinforce conservation of our natural heritage.

<sup>1</sup> There are allowable percentages for non-certified content.

<sup>2</sup> Since its inception, the SFI program has included logger training for non-fee forestlands from which SFI participants source wood.



## BECOME AN INNOVATOR FOR FOREST STEWARDSHIP

Concerned about the changing global climate? Not sure if the natural resources we enjoy today will be here tomorrow for future generations? Dissatisfied with the quality of your water?

Not sure if you can make a difference? Well, you can. Make today your first day as an innovator for forest stewardship by becoming a **Pinchot Associate**.

As a Pinchot Associate, you will join others across the nation who invest resources the Institute needs to quickly, yet thoughtfully, respond to natural resource issues *before* they become policies that ruin our environment, diminish our livelihood or destroy our quality of life. The flexibility your unrestricted gift provides enables us to collaborate nationwide with all of America's people—from rural landowners to federal policymakers—to sustain natural resources and build economic capacity through educational programs, research on forest-management policies, and technical assistance for on-the-ground projects.

As a natural resource steward, becoming a Pinchot Associate will enable you to feel good about protecting our environment while helping others. For your gift of \$100 or more, we will:

- ✿ Keep you informed of timely natural resource issues through *The Pinchot Letter*;
- ✿ Send you advanced notification of our workshops, seminars, conferences, and newly released publications;
- ✿ Give you special recognition in our newsletter and annual report;
- ✿ Send you invitations to special events we host in your community, Washington, DC, and at Grey Towers so you can see for yourself how you are helping to advance forest conservation.

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