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FSC Certification: A Global Forest Certification System



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In many parts of the world, forest certification is gaining momentum in the marketplace. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of their own role in supporting good or bad natural resource management, and they have started using their purchasing power to push the development in a sustainable direction.

The timber and furniture sector is one of the areas where consumer demand for sustainably produced goods has reached a level where it is able to move market shares.

On their side, forest owners and managers have various reasons for wanting certification: For marketing

purposes, for ethical reasons, to improve relations with local people, and as a management tool that ensures a continuous effort to improve all aspects of forest management.

THE FOREST STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL (FSC)

The Forest Stewardship Council is a non-profit making organisation founded in 1993 by a diverse group of environmental organisations, timber traders, forestry professionals, indigenous peoples' organisations, community forestry groups and forest product certification bodies.

FSC is so far the only forest certification system that enjoys global recognition in both temperate, sub-tropical and tropical regions and is the only system consistently using third party, independent assessors to perform the certification. For these reasons, FSC certification has been chosen as the subject of



Wood can be an environmentally friendly and versatile material.
(Photo: Nepenthes).

this article, which explores how global certification systems work.

FSC has developed its own certification system, which is based on ten principles with numerous criteria detailing each principle. The principles and criteria are the concern of a diverse group of members, whose voting power is equal and distributed between three chambers: economic, social and environmental. The equal involvement of these traditionally opposed interest groups has led to results that are workable in practice and promoted goodwill in all areas. Also, certification standards have been developed in collaboration between industry/forestry and social and ecological interests, and are thus not dominated by economic interests.

THE CERTIFICATION PHILOSOPHY

The overall idea of FSC is to promote responsible forest management by providing an economic incentive to forest owners. This is based on the assumption that producers can either get a higher price for their certified goods or gain access to new markets previously inaccessible to them. Certification can be seen as a marketing tool for the timber industry with regards to consumers, whereas to forest managers it may be seen as both marketing and a management tool.

The ultimate objective of the certification programme is to increase the area of forest under socially, ecologically and economically sound management. FSC integrate these considerations into a national context by establishment of national FSC Work Groups. These work groups are responsible for development of national FSC indicators and verifiers for the FSC Principles and Criteria that reflect the specific conditions country/region.

Forests operations and timber processing enterprises can be certified according to the Forest Stewardship Council's standards. The board of the FSC is responsible for evaluating and the accreditation of companies or organisations applying for FSC accreditation. These companies or organisations conducts the actual field assessments and consequently award the certification. Presently 10 companies/organisations worldwide are accredited by FSC.

THE CERTIFICATION ASSESSORS SMARTWOOD AS AN EXAMPLE

SmartWood is the oldest and the largest FSC accredited certification organisation in the world. SmartWood was established by the Rainforest Alliance in 1989 to promote and implement forest product certification worldwide. It is based in the USA but includes partner organizations in Indonesia, Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico, Denmark, and Sweden.

Typically, a team of two to four experts will carry out the assessments. As a minimum the team includes a forester and a local assessor. If forest operations are comprehensive, an ecologist or sociologist will typically be included, and even economists and lawyers may form part of a team. The team is responsible for evaluating the operation's performance in fulfilling

the FSC principles and criteria for good forest management.

Though the assessment itself may only last a few days, the preparations begin at least a month in advance, when stakeholders are informed of the forthcoming assessment and are encouraged to comment on this. Stakeholders include any persons and organisations that have a interest in the management of the property such as NGOs, local authorities, neighbours etc.

Before the field visit, the team examine the management plan and other relevant management documents and set up a so-called sampling matrix. The sampling matrix identifies which compartments in the forest should be visited in order to get a representative and adequate impression of forest management in practise.

During the field visit, the assessment team will examine management practice in the field, on paper in the management plan, and also through interviews with staff to verify that the management practices are communicated and understood. All FSC principles and criteria are verified at these three levels: documents, interviews and inspection. Upon completion of the assessment, a report is drafted and circulated for comments by the operators in question.

Based on observations during the field visit, the team compiles a report with their findings. The report is then sent to the company for comment. When the forest operator has commented on the report, two independent peer reviewers will be asked to comment on the report as well. Both assessors and peer reviewers are bound by confidentiality agreements. Finally, the report including comments will be evaluated by at committee of 2-3 professionals taking the certification decision. Usually, the certification will include a series of conditions that the operators have to fulfil within a give timeframe. These conditions are included in the 5 year contract with the operation.

If a property is certified, the certification organisation will produce a detailed public summary of the assessment report in English or Spanish as well as in local language. These summaries are available from the homepage of the certification organisation.

ANNUAL AUDITS

Following the initial assessment, the operator will be audited each year by a certification auditor. This will be less comprehensive, and will mainly focus on weak areas within the management system, where the assessment team required improvement by establishing conditions for the certification, or on other areas of special interest or controversy. The audits and assessments provide the forest operators with the opportunity to consider their management challenges and get a second opinion on their performance. The assessors are instructed not to act as advisors and to maintain their objectivity and independence, but the ensuing reports will nevertheless give a clear indication of weaknesses and strengths in the management of the forest.

FOREST STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL (FSC) PRINCIPLES AND CRITERIA

<p>Compliance with laws and FSC Principles Forest management shall respect all applicable laws of the country in which they occur, and international treaties and agreements to which the country is a signatory, and comply with all FSC principles and criteria</p> <p>Tenure and use rights and responsibilities Long-term tenure and use rights to the land and forest resources shall be clearly defined, documented and legally established.</p> <p>Indigenous peoples' rights The legal and customary rights of indigenous peoples to own, use and manage their lands, territories and resources shall be recognised and respected.</p> <p>Community relations and workers' rights Forest management operations shall maintain or enhance the long-term social and economic well-</p>	<p>being of forest workers and local communities.</p> <p>Benefits from the forest Forest management operations shall encourage the efficient use of the forest's multiple products and services to ensure economic viability and a wide range of environmental and social benefits.</p> <p>Environmental impact Forest management shall conserve biological diversity and its associated values, water resources, soils, and unique and fragile ecosystems and landscapes, and, by so doing, maintain the ecological functions and the integrity of the forest.</p> <p>Management Plan A management plan - appropriate to the scale and intensity of the operations - shall be written, implemented and kept up to date. The long-term objectives of management, and the means of achieving them, shall be clearly stated.</p>	<p>Monitoring and assessment Monitoring shall be conducted - appropriate to the scale and intensity of the forest management - to assess the condition of the forest, yields of forest products, chain of custody, management activities and their social and environmental impacts.</p> <p>Maintenance of natural forests Primary forests, well-developed secondary forests and sites of major environmental, social or cultural significance shall be conserved. Such areas shall not be replaced by tree plantations or other land uses.</p> <p>Plantations These shall be planned and managed in accordance with principles 1-9. Plantations should complement the management of, reduce pressures on, and promote the restoration and conservation of natural forests.</p>
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¹ Home Depot is the biggest do-it-yourself chain of stores in the USA.

² B & Q is the largest in the UK

³ AssiDomän is the world's largest private forest owner

THE FUTURE OF CERTIFICATION

By spring 2001, approximately 2 million hectares had been awarded FSC certification worldwide. Entire countries, such as Cameroon and the Netherlands, have adopted the FSC Principles and Criteria and incorporated them into new forestry legislation. Other governments, e.g. the Danish, Dutch and English, support FSC by giving preference to FSC-certified products in their purchasing policy.

Global trendsetters in industry and forestry such as the Home Depot¹, B & Q², AssiDomän³ and IKEA are supporting the FSC system through membership and by committing themselves to use an increasing share of FSC timber in their products. Numerous worldwide organisations such as the World Bank, IUCN and WWF are promoting responsible forestry by pushing for FSC certification of commercial forests.

Meanwhile, many other forest certification schemes are being developed locally and regionally, and simultaneously the world's governments are working to establish a global forest convention. The relative importance of the various schemes in relation to the one scheme that is currently globally accepted - the FSC - is negligible, and most of them have serious shortcomings as regards stakeholder support, market recognition as well as credibility. For example, this is the case of the Pan-European Forest Certification scheme, the PEFC. This certification system, which is only supported by the timber producers and forest owners, but is sorely lacking support from international environmental NGOs, has proven to have serious flaws when it comes to credibility and improved forest management practice.

The steady increase in consumer demand for certified timber, and the notable increase in certified forest areas seem to indicate that forest certification has come to stay.

For more information:

- The FSC Secretariat: www.fscoax.org
- The SmartWood Program: www.smartwood.org

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