

FOREST CERTIFICATION AS IT CONTRIBUTES TO SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY

A policy statement approved by resolution
of the National Association of State Foresters



INTRODUCTION

Forest certification has emerged as another tool to promote sustainable forestry practices. Three major programs operating in the U.S. – the American Tree Farm System (ATFS), the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) – are recognized internationally and continue to grow.

While this growth is being driven by marketplace demands for “green” or “environmentally friendly” products, the benefits of certification are not confined to the marketplace. Forest certification requires rigorous documentation to prove that forestry practices are sustainable as defined by a widely accepted standard. This process makes a positive contribution to our nation’s public and private forests.

BACKGROUND

State foresters have regulatory and/or advisory responsibilities for 485 million acres or 59% of the forestland in the United States that is privately owned. State foresters also directly control and manage 76 million acres of publicly owned state forests. This tremendous public trust responsibility gives state foresters a strong interest in tools such as certification that promote sustainable forestry.

State foresters have provided active leadership in the growth and evolution of forest certification since its inception. This experience includes participation in standard development processes, national governing boards, state implementation committees, and direct certification of millions of acres of state forests.

Key Elements of Credible Forest Certification Systems

Credible forest certification programs include the following fundamental elements:

- 1) Independent Governance – The governance body should include economic, environmental, and social interests and operate independently from participants and compliance verifiers or auditors.
- 2) Multi-Stakeholder Standard – A diverse group representing forestry, wildlife, conservation, industry, government, and academic expertise should establish an objective *standard* for sustainable forestry with specific performance measures.
- 3) Independent Certification – Certification requires verifying compliance with the *standard* during full certification and periodic surveillance audits. This should be accomplished by independent, qualified, and accredited third-party auditors. Auditors should meet professional standards established by an independent accreditation body, such as the ANSI National Accreditation Board (ANAB).
- 4) Credible Complaints and Appeals Process – There should be a clear process for credibly responding to on-the-ground compliance concerns or certification challenges.

- 5) Open Participation and Transparency – Public and private sector landowners, including family forest owners, should have access to any forest certification program for which they qualify.

Brands and Equivalency

While in different manners, the ATFS, FSC, and SFI systems include the fundamental elements of credibility and make positive contributions to forest sustainability. Proponents of individual certification programs often promote their option as the best or only option. This has little to do with quality and everything to do with marketing and selling their program. No certification program can credibly claim to be the “best,” and no certification program that promotes itself as the only certification option can maintain credibility. Forest ecosystems are complex and a simplistic “one size fits all” approach to certification cannot address all sustainability needs.

Chain of Custody

In some markets, lumber retailers, paper manufacturers, and publishers are increasingly demanding certification as a means to provide sustainability assurances to customers. Certification programs have responded by developing chain of custody certification options to certify primary and secondary products throughout the supply chain. The concept is that the product can be traced back to the forest to certify sustainability through a third-party audit process. Complex accounting and percentage-based methods have developed along with corresponding product labels to support various chain of custody claims. Given the complexity of land ownership and wood supply patterns in the U.S., chain of custody certification for forests and forest products can be very difficult.

Forest certification programs originating in the U.S., such as SFI and ATFS, recognized the certification challenges unique to this country early in their evolution. Each developed workable requirements for addressing sustainable forestry across all ownerships. Training requirements for on-the-ground personnel (loggers, landowners, and foresters), wood procurement standards, and group landowner certification have broadened participation and made forest certification more meaningful in the U.S.

Independent logger and forester certification programs have grown and evolved along with forest and chain of custody certification programs. Marketplace demand for “chain of custody” certification has created certification options throughout the forest products supply chain. Success depends upon credible processes that work in the U.S., and forest certification provides one avenue for success in the marketplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) NASF advocates for a voluntary and inclusive approach to certification as it relates to landowner objectives. State foresters manage state-owned forests sustainably and support sustainable forest practices on all forestlands. Public and private sector requirements for certification should recognize ATFS, FSC, SFI, and all other credible options. There is no “best” forest certification program. The value of certification is

derived from credible processes and not from brand names. Competition among certification programs produces innovation and continuous improvement in certification processes and on-the-ground forestry practices.

- 2) Forest certification is one of many tools for promoting sustainable forestry practices. The American Tree Farm System (ATFS), the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) are examples of forest certification programs that can make positive contributions to our nation's public and private forests.
- 3) Credible forest certification programs include the following fundamental elements: independent governance, multi-stakeholder standard, independent certification, complaints/appeals process, and open participation and transparency.
- 4) Marketplace demands for "chain of custody" certification must be met with workable solutions for U.S. landowners and U.S. wood supply.
- 5) State foresters have a unique public trust responsibility for the nation's forests and are uniquely qualified to contribute to the continuing improvement of forest certification programs at all levels. State foresters will continue to provide active leadership in the growth and evolution of forest certification.