

Forest Certification USDA Forest Service National Forest System Certification Study



October 2007

Joint Venture

In 2005, the Forest Service and the Pinchot Institute for Conservation signed a joint venture agreement to evaluate the potential consistency of forest certification¹ with the Forest Service's mission to conserve and sustainably manage Federal public lands.

Study Components

As a partner in this study, the Pinchot Institute contracted with auditors to conduct a third-party independent assessment of Forest Service National Forest System (NFS) lands on five national forests in comparison to standards set forth by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). These forests include:

- Allegheny National Forest (PA)
- Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (WI)
- Mt. Hood National Forest (OR)
- National Forests in Florida (FL)
- Lakeview Federal Stewardship Unit on the Fremont-Winema National Forest (OR)

The Pinchot Institute then analyzed the auditors' evaluations and submitted a final report²—“National Forest System (NFS) Certification Study: An Evaluation of the Application of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) Standards on Five National Forest System Management Units”—to the Forest Service.

¹ Certification is a nonregulatory alternative that offers a stamp of approval for forest management practices considered to be environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable. “Independent third party certification” indicates certification to standards derived by a group external to the organization being audited. There are four certification programs, including SFI and FSC, operating in the United States that relate the broad United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) principles to on-the-ground practices. The other two programs are designed for smaller, typically non-industrial private, forest landowners.

² A copy of the report and auditor evaluations are available at: www.fs.fed.us/projects/

The Institute also evaluated lessons learned with participants involved in the certification evaluation including NFS field staff and members of the audit teams.

Study Goals

The NFS Certification Study was designed to help the Forest Service:

1. Evaluate the potential consistency of certification with the existing Forest Service mission to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.
2. Evaluate the potential benefits and costs of third-party certification of national forests and grasslands to externally developed standards.
3. Study the lessons learned as a basis for determining what policy and management changes might be needed in the event the Forest Service were to pursue certification.

Actual certification by FSC or SFI is outside the scope of these evaluations and was not a goal or possible outcome for any of the participating national forests. However, the evaluations were designed to closely approximate the process that a forest would undergo were they actually seeking certification. The auditors were required to use the same approach they would for an actual certification assessment, as accredited by FSC and SFI. The format of the findings was also intended to emulate actual certification reports.

Forest Certification Study Results & Findings



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Study Final Report

The final report¹—“National Forest System (NFS) Certification Study: An Evaluation of the Application of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) Standards on Five National Forest System Management Units”—produced by the Pinchot Institute for Conservation collectively analyzes the individual certification evaluations completed for the five participating national forests and the lessons learned with Forest Service field staff and lead auditors involved in these field evaluations.

The intention is to inform and enrich the national dialogue on the potential value of forest certification on public forest lands and to assist in leading a stronger broad-based consensus on conservation and sustainable management of America’s public forests.

Results of the Evaluations

The complexity of the Forest Service planning process, the scope of the Forest Service mission, and the professionalism and expertise of NFS staff contributed to one of the most comprehensive reviews the auditors had conducted.

During the course of their reviews, the auditors commended the participating national forests for meeting or exceeding many of the requirements of Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) audit standards.

National forests are integrating complex direction and management considerations extremely well—the broad range of objectives established for national forests are supported by a remarkable degree of scientific and consultative review and the outcomes of these processes are designed into plans and projects, and are well

addressed throughout implementation.

The auditors did cite some non-conformances common to most forests, including issues associated with: 1) addressing the backlog of road maintenance (inadequate road maintenance and decommissioning), 2) adequate monitoring of non-wood forest products and wildlife, 3) addressing forest health and insect and disease problems, 4) old-growth protection and management issues, and 5) monitoring compliance with contractor worker safety requirements and training.

A number of non-conformances and associated corrective action requests (CARs) arise only because the national forests are not actually seeking certification at this time and so are essentially not applicable in the context of these studies. These “technical gaps” include requirements such as statements of commitment to the programs, formal reporting to FSC and SFI, and related issues.

Future Plans—Making Use of the Results and Findings

The NFS Certification Study provided a valuable opportunity to learn about FSC and SFI certification and the third-party auditing processes associated with them, to evaluate how NFS approaches align with these systems, and to advance the dialogue on the policy issues facing the Forest Service and the certification programs.

The Forest Service has not yet determined whether it will seek certification as a result of this study, but is in the process of reviewing the results of the certification evaluations and this report. The Forest Service will evaluate its options in consultation with key stakeholders and then determine how to proceed.

¹ A copy of the report and certification evaluations are available at: www.fs.fed.us/projects/

Forest Certification Background



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Background

Public attention regarding forests increased significantly over the last half of the 20th century, and the call to encourage sustainable development has emerged worldwide. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)—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 and they capture today's broader definition of sustainability. Though still very dynamic, the definition has expanded to address the health of the entire forest ecosystem.

While there are many regulations governing forest management, particularly in the United States, certification is a nonregulatory alternative that offers an independent means of verifying whether forest management practices conform to various standards for environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable forest management.

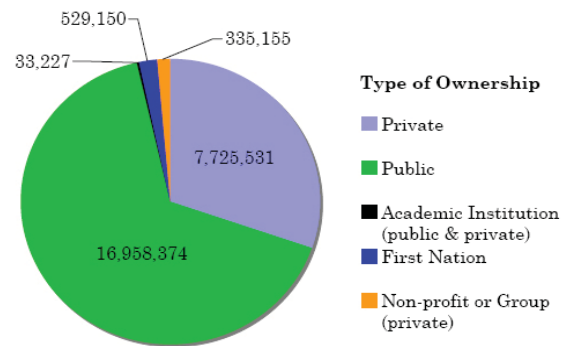
There are four certification programs operating in the United States that have taken broader definitions of sustainability and distilled them into practical approaches to assessing on-the-ground practices. Each program based its standards on a set of principles, criteria and indicators. Even though the programs' standards and approaches to determining conformance differ, they share common attributes. The major certification programs in the United States include the American Tree Farm System, Green Tag, Sustainable Forestry Initiative, and Forest Stewardship Council.

Today, development of forestry standards is occurring in more than 80 countries around the

world and over one billion acres worldwide have been certified. In additional countries, stakeholders are in discussion about the establishment of forestry standards.

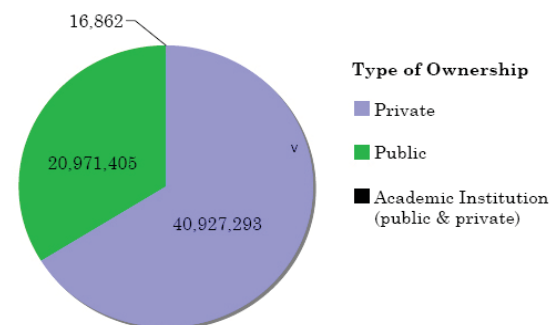
In the United States, over 14 million acres of state-owned public forest lands are certified (see Figures below), and mostly under both the FSC and SFI systems. No Federal lands have become SFI-certified, and only the forest lands of Fort Lewis, an installation of the Department of Defense, have become FSC-certified. Presently, Marsh-Billings National Historic Site is completing an FSC assessment, following on a case study initiated by the Pinchot Institute.

Forest Stewardship Council (numbers in acres)



FSC forest management certifications, October, 2007. Prepared with data provided by the Forest Certification Resource Center, Metafore

Sustainable Forestry Initiative (numbers in acres)



SFI forest management certifications, October, 2007. Prepared with data provided by the Forest Certification Resource Center, Metafore

Forest Certification

Forest Certification Programs



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Four Programs

There are four certification programs operating in the United States that distill the broad UNCED principles to on-the-ground practices. Although the programs approach conformance to their standards differently, each of the programs share common attributes including reforestation, which is the cornerstone of sustainable forestry. The four major certification programs in the United States include:

American Tree Farm System®

The American Tree Farm System® is a program of the American Forest Foundation, a nonprofit organization, headquartered in Washington, DC, which operates throughout the United States. The longest-operating program of this kind has been enrolling forest owners and inspecting forests for more than 60 years. Its stated mission is “to promote the growing of renewable forest resources on private lands while protecting environmental benefits and increasing public understanding of all benefits of productive forestry.” To help landowners meet these goals, the American Tree Farm System provides outreach, education, and technical assistance. There are approximately 87,000 certified Tree Farms totaling almost 27 million acres of family forest land across 46 States. Landowners with at least 10 acres of managed forest land may seek certification of their land by the American Tree Farm System. www.treefarmssystem.org

Forest Stewardship Council

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), founded in 1993 as an international organization, represents a diverse membership including forest managers, woodworkers, timber traders, retailers, indigenous peoples, and environmental groups, FSC’s mission is to promote environmentally responsible, socially responsible, and economically viable management of the world’s forests. The FSC’s basis for certification is a comprehensive set of principles and criteria encompassing environmental impact, economic and social benefits, protection of critical conserva-

tion values, workers’ and human rights, compliance with laws, planning, and monitoring. FSC also accredits certifiers to conduct forest management assessments. As of August 2007, the FSC had certified over 23 million acres of forest land in the United States and 250 million acres worldwide.

www.fscus.org

Green Tag

The Green Tag program was developed by the National Forestry Association in cooperation with members of the Association of Consulting Foresters and the National Woodland Owners Association. It aims to support forestry practices that assure a balance of natural diversity and sustainable forest productivity. Green Tag is expressly designed for use by private forest landowners and is available in all 50 States. As of April 2007, the Green Tag program had certified 67,806 acres in 12 States and British Columbia. www.woodlandowners.org

Sustainable Forestry Initiative

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) program was adopted in 1994 by members of the American Forest & Paper Association, which is the national trade association of the forest, pulp, paper, paperboard, and wood products industry. It represents more than 80 percent of the paper, wood, and forest products produced in the United States. The SFI program principles call on the United States forest products industry to practice a land stewardship ethic that integrates the reforestation, nurturing, and harvesting of trees for useful products with the conservation of soil, air, and water resources; wildlife and fish habitat; and forest aesthetics. The SFI Standard is now managed by the independent 501 (c)(3) multi-stakeholder Sustainable Forestry Board. As of 2007, over 53 million acres of forest land in the United States had been independently third-party certified to the SFI Standard.

www.aboutsfi.org

Note: The Tree Farm and Green Tag certification programs are designed for smaller, typically non-industrial private, forest landowners.