

FOREST CERTIFICATION: A BRIEF PRIMER

Forest certification systems are voluntary tools designed to recognize and promote environmentally responsible forestry and sustainability of forest resources. Certification originated in response to concerns in the 1980s about the sustainability of tropical forests that were being logged illegally, harvested with no plans for regeneration, and placed under slash-and-burn agriculture. Later in that decade, the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future*, set a vision for global sustainable development and proposed that sustainability should rely on the commitment of present generations not to limit the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

In the early 1990s, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro expanded the topic of discussion from only tropical forests to the sustainability of tropical, temperate, and boreal forests. The conference also led to international efforts, such as the Montreal Process and the Pan-European (Helsinki) Process, to develop criteria and indicators of “sustainable forest management” at national scales. Simultaneous with these developments, forest certification systems such as the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), and American Tree Farm System (ATFS) were developed by non-governmental organizations. All three of these systems initially developed forest certification standards intended for application at the ownership or property scale. These standards provide measures for monitoring and evaluating the practice of sustainable forestry. SFI and FSC also subsequently developed chain of custody standards that allow entities using wood in the manufacturing process to demonstrate that wood or fiber contained in their products can be traced back to certified or responsibly managed forests, or from post-consumer recycled material.

Forest Certification Standards

The most widely applied forest certification standards in the U.S. are SFI, FSC, and ATFS. The ATFS is most often applied by smaller, family forest owners while the SFI and FSC are most often applied by larger landowners and agencies. Some landowners in the U.S. are certified to both the SFI and FSC standards. These three forest certification standards require forest managers to address social, ecological, and economic aspects of forest management, including important ecological attributes such as long-term site productivity, water quality, biological diversity, and species and communities of high conservation value. The standards also require that forestry practices implemented under the standards be economically efficient and socially responsible, i.e., comply with all applicable social laws and provide the economic incentive necessary to keep forest ownerships profitable and competitive, and to keep people gainfully employed. Requirements in the standards often are above and beyond regulatory obligations.

All three standards are structured similarly with requirements organized in a hierarchy consisting of three tiers. The programs, however, use different terms to describe some of the tiers (Table 1). Elements in the highest tier are the fundamental goals of sustainable forestry such as compliance with laws, forest management planning, monitoring, conservation of biological diversity, interaction with stakeholders, transparency, and continual improvement. Requirements in the second tier generally describe outcomes that, if accomplished, allow managers to judge whether an objective or principle has been fulfilled. The final tiers in the three standards consist

of indicators, which are metrics that allow managers to gauge progress towards fulfillment of a criterion or performance measure. Examples of elements from these three tiers in the 2010-2014 SFI Standard are presented in Table 2. In addition to these three tiers of elements, the SFI Standard also includes an introductory set of 14 “Principles” which are described as “the vision and direction for sustainable forest management.”

Compliance with forest certification standards is monitored through third-party audits. Generally, the standards require participants to undergo periodic surveillance and routine (e.g., every 3 years) recertification audits. These audits must be conducted by a certification body that is accredited through one or more independent, international accreditation bodies such as the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), ANSI-ASQ National Accreditation Board (ANAB), or the Standards Council of Canada (SCC). The certification body is required to prepare summaries of surveillance and recertification audits that must be made publicly available (e.g., posted on the certification program website). In addition to third-party audits, companies often conduct voluntary, internal audits to assess the status of their implementation efforts.

Chain of Custody and Fiber Sourcing Standards

Chain of custody standards are accounting systems that manufacturing companies use to track wood and fiber content through production and manufacturing to the end product. This allows companies to make claims about how much of the wood or fiber in their product comes from certified lands, certified sourcing, controlled wood, and/or post-consumer recycled content. Companies that meet the requirements of chain of custody standards are allowed to place labels on their products that specify how much of their product comes from certified lands, how much contains post-consumer recycled content, and/or how much is responsibly sourced. Users of chain of custody standards must undergo routine audits by independent, accredited certification bodies.

The SFI Program contains objectives, performance measures, and indicators for responsible sourcing. Under SFI’s Fiber Sourcing requirements, companies that source wood or fiber from uncertified lands must have a program that ensures they purchase wood or fiber from certified logging professionals and qualified logging professionals, have a program to ensure that best management practices are applied on those uncertified lands, and engage in private landowner outreach and logger training. They also must promote the identification and protection of important habitat elements for wildlife, including critically imperiled and imperiled species and communities, and prompt reforestation of harvested sites. Compliance with these fiber sourcing requirements also is monitored through audits by third-party, independent accredited certification bodies.

Manufacturing companies who participate in the FSC Chain of Custody Standard and source wood or fiber from uncertified lands must conduct a risk assessment to ensure that they avoid purchasing timber and timber products from unacceptable sources. This Controlled Wood risk assessment is designed to help certificate holders avoid trading in illegally harvested wood, wood harvested in violation of traditional and civil rights, wood harvested in forests where high conservation values are threatened by management activities, wood harvested in forests being

converted to plantations or non-forest use, and wood from forests in which genetically modified trees are planted.

Links to the Standards

Sustainable Forestry Initiative: <http://www.sfiprogram.org/sfi-standard/>
 Forest Stewardship Council – U.S.: <https://us.fsc.org/certification.194.htm>
 American Tree Farm System: <https://www.treefarmssystem.org/atfscertification>

Table 1. Terms used for the three tiers of requirements in the three forest certification standards most widely applied in the United States.				
Tier	Forest Certification Standard¹			Definition
	SFI²	FSC	ATFS	
1	Objective	Principle	Standard	A fundamental goal of sustainable forest management. An essential rule or element.
2	Performance Measure	Criterion	Performance Measure	A means of judging whether an objective, principle, or standard has been fulfilled
3	Indicator	Indicator	Indicator	A specific requirement in the standard, subordinate to the higher tiers. A specific metric that provides information about the organization’s performance and is integral to assessing conformance to the objectives/principles and criteria/performance measures
¹ ATFS = American Tree Farm System, FSC = Forest Stewardship Council, SFI = Sustainable Forestry Initiative. ² In addition to the three tiers in this table, the SFI Standard includes an introductory set of 14 “Principles” described as “the vision and direction for sustainable forest management.”				

Table 2. Example of an objective, a performance measure, and three indicators from the 2010-2014 Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) forest certification standard.	
Tier	Text from 2010-2014 Standard
1	Objective 2. Forest Productivity. To ensure long-term forest productivity, carbon storage, and conservation of forest resources through prompt reforestation, soil conservation, afforestation and other measures.
2	Performance Measure 2.3. Program Participants shall implement forest management practices to protect and maintain forest and soil productivity.
3	Indicators: 1. Use of soils maps where available. 2. Process to identify soils vulnerable to compaction, and use of appropriate methods to avoid excessive soil disturbance. 3. Use of erosion control measures to minimize the loss of soil and site productivity.