While there are dozens of different forest certification systems in use around the world, they share many of the same basic objectives. All demonstrate an additional measure of commitment to sustainable forestry and are effective mechanisms for encouraging and expanding a responsible marketplace for print, paper and paper-based packaging.

**What is Forest Certification?**

Forest certification is a voluntary process whereby an independent third party assesses the quality of forest management and production against a set of requirements (standards) predetermined by a public or private certification organization. Forest certification and associated labelling, is a way of informing consumers about the sustainability of the forests from which wood and other forest products were produced.¹

There are two types of forest certification:¹

1. **Forest management certification**, which assesses whether forests are being managed according to a specified set of standards; and
2. **Chain of custody** (CoC) certification, which verifies that certified material is identified or kept separate from non-certified or non-controlled material through the production process, from the forest to the final consumer.

Most forest management certification standards address a wide range of economic, social, environmental and technical aspects of forest management, including the well-being of workers and of families living in and around the forest area subject to certification.¹

The CoC process can be used to show that wood as a whole is more environmentally friendly than certain alternatives by demonstrating that the entire process is monitored, verifiable and transparent.²

**How are Forests Certified?**

Third party certification is based on onsite comprehensive assessments performed by an accredited auditing firm. At completion of the assessment, the auditing firms submit a certification report, which includes a recommendation on whether the landowner is ready to become certified. An affirmative recommendation for certification is often accompanied by requests for changes in management practices to better conform to the certification standard. A summary of certification audit findings is made publicly available.

**Forest Certification Standards**

The Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification™ (PEFC™) standards account for the vast majority of certified forests and chain-of-custody certificates around the world.

Forest certification programs operate at a national or regional level. An important mission of PEFC is to evaluate and endorse national and regional programs, such as the Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI®) and American Tree Farm System (ATFS) standards in the United States and Canadian Standards Association (CSA) standard in Canada.

Nearly 800 million acres (320 million hectares) are managed in compliance with PEFC’s internationally accepted sustainability benchmarks. Three quarters of all certified forests globally are certified to PEFC standards. PEFC has 55 national members and 48 endorsed national certification systems around the world. 750,000 forest owners are PEFC certified globally. Approximately 20,000 PEFC chain-of-custody certificates have been issued globally, with 238 in the United States and 183 in Canada.³

In North America, growth of SFI forest management certification leads all other standards with 375 million acres (152 million hectares) certified. Among the SFI Forest Management Standard’s requirements are measures to protect water quality, biodiversity, wildlife habitat, species at risk, the rights of indigenous peoples, workers’ rights, including

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Gender equity, and forests with exceptional conservation value. SFI accounts for nearly 35% of global certified forests and 46% of PEFC certifications worldwide. Products that are certified to SFI standards are sold in more than 140 countries.5

FSC forest management certification confirms that the forest is being managed in a way that preserves biological diversity and benefits the lives of local people and workers, while ensuring it sustains economic viability. Approximately 549 million acres (222 million hectares) globally are certified to the FSC standard, with 120 million acres (49 million hectares) certified in Canada and 35 million acres (15 million hectares) certified in the United States. Approximately 45,000 FSC chain-of-custody certificates have been issued globally, with 2,487 issued in the United States.5

Global Certification Status

The global area of certified forests is nearly 11% of the world’s total forest area. It is estimated that about 30% of total global roundwood production originates from certified forest areas.6

The majority of certified forest area in 2019 was in North America and Europe. Canada had by far the most at 167 million hectares, followed by the Russian Federation (54.1 million hectares) and the United States (38.1 million hectares). These three countries together accounted for more than 60% percent of the world’s certified forest area in 2019.7

Differences and Variability

To a certain extent, their very origins forced FSC and SFI to start at opposite ends of the spectrum. In defining the ideal and being international in scope, it was important that FSC take into consideration the worst-case scenario and develop extensive control mechanisms that addressed the need for strong monitoring and enforcement. To accomplish this level of quality assurance FSC felt it was necessary to build most of the systems, processes and procedures from scratch. SFI, on the other hand, exclusively represented U.S. industrial forestland, which is some of the best-managed forestland in the world. SFI’s originators sought to incorporate as much of the existing regulatory requirements, business systems, processes and procedures into the process as possible. For both, the goal was to increase the opportunity for the marketplace to support and fund good forestry practices.10

Over the years, many of the issues that previously divided the certification systems have become much less distinct. The largest certification systems now generally have the same structural programmatic requirements.11

A great deal of careful work has been done comparing the strengths and weaknesses of the FSC and SFI forest management standard. The conclusion? They really aren’t all that different…the inescapable truth is that the on-the-ground results aren’t worth arguing about.12

Competition Benefits All Standards

No certification program can credibly claim to be 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. Certification is driven by the marketplace, and the marketplace has driven the development of certification programs at all levels of the forest products supply chain. Competition among certification programs produces innovation and continuous improvement in certification processes and on-the-ground forestry practices.13
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