

Certification of Small-Scale Forests in the United States

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ABSTRACT

As forest certification programs have developed, several approaches have been used in the United States to aid family forest owners interested in participating in these programs. Approaches include group certification, government incentive programs, development of forestry cooperatives and landowner associations, and a variety of programs developed and supported by both non-profit organizations and private industry. This paper provides an overview of the two major certification systems available to small-scale forests in the U.S., various approaches to certification that have been utilized, and the long-term outlook for family forest certification and its potential as a rural development mechanism in the United States.

Keywords: certification, family forests, rural development

INTRODUCTION

Private ownership of forests in the United States is significant. About 58 percent of U.S. forestlands, representing 160 million hectares (393 million acres) are privately owned (Birch 1996). This ownership category includes lands owned by individuals and families as well as by corporations and various organizations such as Native American Indian tribes, clubs, partnerships and associations.

The category of small-scale forests in the U.S. is frequently referred to as “family forests” and is defined to include lands at least 0.4 hectares (1 acre) in size, 10 percent stocked, and owned by an individual, married couple, family estate or trust, or

other group that is not incorporated (Butler 2004). There are more than 10 million family forest owners in the country representing about 65 percent of privately owned forestland and 42 percent of the nation’s forestland (Butler 2004). Small parcels dominate privately owned forests in the U.S., with more than 90 percent being less than 41 hectares (100 acres) in size (Butterfield 2005).

About half of the private woodland owners in the United States have experience with timber harvesting and harvests from non-industrial, privately owned forests account for nearly 60 percent of the country’s wood supply (Butterfield 2005). Since the mid-1990s, about 4 million acres of family forestlands in the U.S. have enrolled in forest certification programs (Fernholz 2006); a wide range of approaches that have been used to achieve this level of participation and a number of efforts to help engage more private forestlands in certification are underway.

FOREST CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS FOR FAMILY FORESTS IN THE UNITED STATES

There are two primary forest certification systems available to private woodland owners in the United States. These two systems are the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

American Tree Farm System

The American Tree Farm System (ATFS) is a program of the American Forest Foundation (AFF).

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Membership in the ATFS is open to any individual or organization owning between 10 and 10,000 acres. There is no cost to becoming an ATFS member and the only obligation of membership is development of a written management plan that follows the AFF's standards. The ATFS is "committed to sustaining forests, watersheds and healthy habitats through the power of private stewardship" (AFF 2006).

The ATFS operates through state committees, often with administrative support from state forestry associations. Public and private foresters also play a significant role in the widespread implementation of the ATFS program by providing volunteer services, including free inspections.

The AFF issued revised certification standards in December 2002. These standards have been applied to all newly enrolled properties and to existing Tree Farms' 5-year re-inspections beginning July 1, 2004. To facilitate adoption of the revisions, the AFF directed national staff to revise the inspection process, to provide refresher training for inspecting foresters, and to inform members about the new standards. The ATFS offers Lead Auditor training courses and On-Line Inspector Refresher Training, and the National Interpretations Committee has issued a report on interpretation of the standards with direction on how they are to be used by the certified ATFS Inspectors. For associations or individuals interested in more information about the ATFS Group Certification process, a *Manual for Group Organizations* is available.

Group certification is a mechanism that allows a number of individual landowners to come together to share the costs and responsibilities of certification. By forming a group, landowners can reduce their individual burdens; however, group entities are subject to additional certification record keeping and reporting requirements. Record keeping responsibilities are distributed between the landowners participating in the group certificate who are "group members" and the entity that holds the certificate, the "group manager". Various certification programs, including both the ATFS and the Forest Stewardship Council, offer a group certification alternative to individual certificates.

The American Tree Farm System (ATFS)

established its group certification program in 2002 and has since certified 9 organizations representing about 3.5 million acres under this program. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), a state level government agency, administers the largest of these groups. The WDNR administered group includes about 29,000 landowners with a collective land base of about 2 million acres (WDNR 2006). These landowners are enrollees in Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law (MFL), a program that provides reductions in property taxes for woodland owners who make a long-term commitment to following a written forest management plan. Establishment of this group certificate in May 2005 represented the first time a statewide program for private woodland owners in the United States achieved third-party certification.

The American Tree Farm System (ATFS) is currently operational only in the United States. To create opportunities for international market recognition of its program, the ATFS has been active in mutual recognition efforts. Since 2000, the ATFS has had a mutual recognition agreement with the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), a certification program developed by the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA). This agreement recognizes the appropriateness of ATFS for small ownerships and the compatible application of the SFI system on larger ownerships. The ATFS is also a member of the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification schemes (PEFC). The PEFC is a system that allows for the development of regional or national certification programs that can then apply to PEFC for review of their adequacy in meeting what PEFC has defined as international minimum guidelines for forest certification schemes. This mutual recognition system is intended to allow for local flexibility in setting certification standards while still providing an international mechanism for marketplace recognition and acceptance of endorsed programs. The PEFC system has been most widely applied in Europe but has expanded in recent years, to include the endorsement of a forest certification system in Canada and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) in the United States. It is anticipated that ATFS will pursue PEFC endorsement, with an application likely submitted before the end of 2006.

Forest Stewardship Council

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) was formed in 1993, and the U.S.-based office was established in 1995. The Forest Stewardship Council is an international membership organization. About 22 million acres of forestland are FSC-certified in the United States.

From the beginning, the FSC has intended to make its certification program accessible to “all sizes, scales and types of forests around the world” (FSC 2004). Through its group certification program, the FSC has certified a wide variety of organizations and ownerships including members of forestry cooperatives, landowner associations, and clients of consulting foresters.

In 1995, SmartWood, an FSC-accredited certification body based in the U.S, pioneered a Resource Manager Certification model that was subsequently approved by the FSC and has been widely applied. In this model, a consulting forester or similar responsible party holds an FSC certificate and is able to enroll clients or other interested landowners as members of their certified group. The responsible party in the FSC’s group certification structure holds the certificate and is the “group manager”. The group manager undergoes a field and office audit to verify compliance with the FSC-standard. The landowners are “group members” and are also included in the audit. Forestlands enrolled in the group certificate are selectively sampled for site visits during the certification assessment and subsequent annual audits. The FSC also offers a group chain-of-custody certification program for small businesses interested in producing and marketing FSC labeled products.

Despite the FSC’s efforts and commitments, the size and number of enrolled family and community forests in the FSC system has been slow to grow both internationally and domestically. Small property owners and managers have found it especially challenging to interpret the standards in relationship to the scope of their operations.

In response, the FSC initiated the “Small and Low Intensity Managed Forests” (SLIMFs) project in 2001. The committee for this project identified the barriers facing family forest certification efforts

and suggested solutions and policy changes for the FSC. The FSC Board of Directors reviewed the committee’s recommendations in November 2003 and established a working definition for “small or low intensity managed forests” and approved streamlined assessment and auditing protocols for qualifying ownerships. Certification applicants in the United States and Canada that manage less than 2,500 acres are eligible for modified FSC assessment protocols that pilot projects have shown can reduce the expense of the FSC certification process by 20 to 50 percent (Fernholz 2004).

In 2005, the Forest Stewardship Council’s U.S. office (FSC-US) completed a project in partnership with Georgia-Pacific Corp. to help inform both organizations about certification needs and opportunities for family forest landowners in the United States. The test project sampled clients of Georgia-Pacific’s Forest Management Assistance Program (FMAP) in relation to three areas of interest: determining the benefits or impacts of the FSC’s Family Forest Program to small landowners; evaluating the application of FSC’s Controlled Wood Standard on non-FSC certified and family forest lands; and implementation of the FSC Plantations Principle on family forestlands.

The technical team for the project came up with key recommendations for improving access to FSC certification for family forest owners. Several of these recommendations related to changes to the regional standard to allow greater streamlining, the use of self-evaluating checklists, avoiding the use of jargon, providing a template management plan, and simplifying the application of the concept of High Conservation Value Forests (HCVFs) on small properties (FSC 2005).

The team specifically referenced the FSC document FSC-GUI-60-100, which provides guidance for streamlining the FSC Regional Standards “to simplify and clarify requirements for small and low intensity operations.” This document suggests that:

“...standards writing groups should consider creating a more user-friendly version of the standard by eliminating those criteria, indicators, and verifiers which apply only to larger operations...Standards writing groups could also

provide a ‘front page’ to their national scale/size-adapted standard, which points each forest manager to the parts of the standard which applies to them. In countries where forest managers are familiar with forms for self-evaluation (eg. written grant applications, or self-assessment for tax purposes), National Initiatives (eg, FSC-US) are encouraged to produce check-list type standards that managers can use to self-evaluate his or her compliance prior to the arrival of the auditor. (FSC 2006)”

This streamlined approach to standards development for small properties has been applied by the FSC in Germany and British Columbia, Canada. Both areas now have regional standards that are specifically interpreted and written for small properties.

THE ROLE OF SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS AND PROGRAMS

A variety of organizations and programs have provided support and assistance to woodland owners in the U.S who are interested in forest certification. These organizations include non-profit and non-governmental groups, government entities, cooperatives and landowner associations, and the forest products industry.

Non-Profit Organizations

In the U.S., non-profits and non-governmental organizations have helped support certification on family forests. Their support has included education and outreach efforts as well as assistance in applying for and managing group certificates. An example of a non-profit that is facilitating forest certification in the United States is the Northwest Natural Resource Group (NNRG). Their Northwest Certified Forestry program manages a group certificate that offers access to FSC certification for landowners in Washington and Oregon in the Northwest Region of the U.S. and also helps wood buyers find FSC-certified materials to purchase (NNRG 2006). The Community Forestry Resource Center (CFRC) located in the Upper Midwest provides similar services to family forest owners in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Michigan.

Government Incentive Programs

The certification of family forestlands enrolled in government incentives programs is a growing trend. These groups of landowners and the government-administered programs provide a degree of existing structure that helps facilitate group certification. Several states are examining the approach taken in Wisconsin and the certification of forestlands enrolled in forest related programs such as property tax laws that include requirements for forest management. Research has also been undertaken to evaluate federal assistance programs and their compatibility with certification standards (Fernholz 2006).

Forestry Cooperatives and Landowner Associations

Similar to the role of non-profit organizations, several landowner associations in the U.S. also assist their members with certification. The National Woodland Owners Association (NWOA) offers its own certification program – Green Tag Forestry – for its members. As of January 2006, about 28,000 hectares (68,700 acres) are certified through this program (NWOA 2006).

Forestry cooperatives have also assisted with certification for their members. The Living Forest Cooperative (LFC) in Wisconsin provides access to FSC certification as well as marketing services for its members (LFC 2006). The Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative (MWC) manages an FSC group certificate for both woodland owners as well as small wood products companies (MWC 2006). Additional landowner associations in Maine, Vermont, New York, and Virginia also provide certification access as a member service.

Private Industry Supported Programs

The forest products industry in the U.S has provided assistance with family forest certification efforts. The American Tree Farm System (ATFS) is recognized and supported by a number of forest products companies and the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA), the trade association

for the industry. More directly, individual companies that provide forest management services to private woodland owners have assisted with certification efforts. As mentioned, Georgia-Pacific Corp. completed a study in partnership with FSC-US to evaluate opportunities to improve certification access on family forests. Also, Stora-Enso manages an ATFS group certificate for landowners they provide forest management services to in Wisconsin (AFF 2005).

CERTIFICATION'S POTENTIAL AS A RURAL DEVELOPMENT MECHANISM IN THE U.S.

There are several common barriers to certification of family forests that limit its current application and stifle its potential. These barriers include the costs of certification and technical demands of the certification standards. Work is underway to identify solutions. In addition, there are several other disincentives to family forest certification that need attention.

CERTIFICATION COSTS

The direct costs of certification relate primarily to the assessment costs. Both ATFS and FSC have made efforts to reduce assessment costs by allowing for one-person assessment teams, streamlined audit reports and procedures, and reductions in annual audit requirements. It is notable that ATFS has historically relied on free assessments provided by partners and volunteers. The various certification programs could explore opportunities for reviving or developing some element of free auditor services for small properties.

TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

Certification standards offer several areas of technical challenge, including requirements for management planning, monitoring, record keeping, and reporting. In regards to group certification, there are additional group manager responsibilities that add administrative duties.

A significant contribution by the ATFS to help interested parties overcome challenges is the availability of a template management plan and a Manual for Group Organizations that outlines requirements for a group manager. The ATFS also offers a user-friendly certification standard. Some helpful materials are also available for landowners interested in the FSC program, but generally not directly available from FSC itself. Landowners interested in FSC often have to work through the loose network of FSC certificate holders to seek out assistance with understanding precedent and to obtain copies of templates and documents for managing an FSC group certificate. Some FSC group certificate holders have made the documents used for administration of their certificate available at their websites. The FSC has developed user-friendly versions of its forest management standards in only a few regions.

THE NEED FOR NATIONAL LEVEL SERVICES

A recent policy brief from the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies identified four measures to improve the accessibility of forest certification for small operations: 1) reducing auditing costs; 2) engaging governments (e.g., forestry departments) in promoting certification; 3) introducing stepwise approaches for small forest enterprises; and 4) developing national services to support certification (Scheyvens 2006).

The need for the first three has been generally well recognized and efforts to address these areas are already being implemented to at least some degree across the U.S. However, relatively little attention has been given thus far to the fourth measure. Part of the opportunity suggested in this fourth measure is the development of collaborative partnerships between a variety of entities, including government and non-governmental organizations, and for-profit and non-profit organizations, to support certification initiatives. As noted previously, there are numerous and diverse organizations that have been facilitating forest certification on family forests, including both FSC and ATFS initiatives that partner with local committees, organizations, and volunteers. Building and supporting these efforts may provide

opportunities to achieve greater capacity and establish greater collaboration and coordination. The reality is that with 10 million private woodland owners distributed all over the country, a single organization or program is unlikely to achieve critical mass. Partnerships, and large partnerships, may be needed to establish a consistent and strong message of responsible forestry and to achieve measurable, self-sustaining momentum.

CONCLUSION

Private woodland owners represent a significant proportion of forestlands in the United States. Many efforts have been made to engage these landowners in forest certification programs. Efforts by the certification programs, non-profits, government agencies, landowner associations, and industry have resulted in a modest level of participation to date. To achieve critical mass, greater collaboration between organizations and coordination of efforts may be needed.

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