

Forest Certification in an Era of Globalization

Striking a Balance Between Profiting from Forests and Protecting Them

Over the past several decades, our planet has experienced a dramatic loss of forest habitat. The loss can be attributed to many factors, including land conversion for agriculture and urban development and removal of wood for fuel use. A major cause of degradation and loss of forestland, particularly in developing and transitional countries, is inefficient or destructive harvesting practices of the forest industry. However, forestry need not be destructive; applying sustainable forest management practices can ensure a balance between profiting from and protecting forests. As part of its effort to help strike this balance, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has committed time and resources to promoting sustainable forest management practices. One such method is *forest certification*.

Increasingly, consumers worldwide are realizing that purchasing wood and wood products from regions where destructive timber harvesting occurs contributes to the loss of forests globally. Consequently, there has been a growing public demand to reverse this trend. Forest certification is one sustainable way to address indiscriminate forest depletion. It does so by promoting environmentally and ecologically sound harvesting and management practices. Forest certification also seeks to maintain and enhance the environmental and cultural importance of forests to indigenous populations. At a policy level, many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and donors view forest certification as a market-based approach that compensates for the difficulties of establishing regulatory oversight in many countries.

Forest Certification

The forest certification movement began in the late 1980s, concentrating its efforts on the timber industry in the tropics. Since then, the focus of activities has expanded to include temperate and boreal forests, and more than 90 certification schemes have evolved worldwide. A voluntary effort, forest certification has gained international support from both wholesale buyers and retail companies.



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Forest Stewardship Council tracking system for certified logs in Bolivia

The forest certification process begins with a forest manager's or landowner's voluntary request for a forest inspection by an independent team of forestry experts. The team evaluates the operator's forest harvesting and management practices against a predetermined set of standards. Once the

inspection is complete, a certificate is issued confirming the quality of forest management.

Most forest certification programs establish standards developed through an open process that encourages the participation of all concerned and affected parties, including those from the surrounding communities and local interest groups. The standards implemented reflect the principles, criteria, specific laws, and policies of respective countries and regions. The attitudes of forest operators and the cultural and social norms of forest-dwelling communities call for a realistic balance between timber producers' economic interests and environmental concerns and social objectives. Once a forestry operation is inspected and certified, it can then label raw materials as originating from a certified forest. "Labeling" materials links consumers directly to forestry activities by providing them the option to purchase products from certified forests. In effect, the certification and labeling process empowers the consumer and provides producers with an economic incentive to adopt environmentally sound forest practices.

Developing Country Issues

In many countries, commercial forestry companies are pursuing forest certification to increase sales of forestry products. Producing raw materials, such as logs, sawn lumber, or finished wood products, through a forest certification method enables companies to access international markets and meet increasing demands of environmentally concerned consumers worldwide. It is anticipated that increased consumer demand for certified wood and wood products will compel buyers to purchase certified forest products, thereby expanding producer access to a growing global market.

Presently, few developing country producers are able to meet market demands while maintaining acceptable levels of quality. Additionally, achieving forest certification is proving insurmountable for small landowners—particularly community forestry operations—due to financial constraints and

lack of requisite technical and managerial skills. Many forest certification programs are exploring ways to curb certification costs for small-scale forestry operations in developing countries. To complement this effort, international development entities like USAID are providing technical and business training assistance to achieve forest certification goals.

International Assistance

In its effort to promote sustainable development, USAID supports numerous activities that improve forest management and support the goals of forest certification. These activities include:

- assisting countries in building their capacities to assess and measure sustainable forest management;
- facilitating discussions (including funding and convening workshops, conventions, forums, and publishing documents) on timber certification;
- funding projects and providing information comparing the various elements and aspects of timber certification schemes;
- helping countries build their capacity to develop credible environmental auditing systems that may assist them in achieving certification; and
- supporting efforts to recognize that timber certification is an important tool in encouraging and creating incentives for sustainable management of the world's forests.

At the international policy level, the U.S. Government supports forestry certification efforts that are clearly defined, and voluntary (that is, not imposed on companies by national governments or international organizations), and that respect the host country's sovereign rights and responsibilities.

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