



A Look at Two Certification Standards for Family Forest Owners in Alabama

By Victoria Lockhart and Chris Erwin

Forest certification is a topic of increasing interest among forest landowners today, primarily because landowners are deciding how certification can help market their timber and ecosystem services such as carbon credits. In a nutshell, forest certification is a way for a landowner to obtain independent third-party documentation that their timberland property is managed in such a way that ensures forest sustainability. With all certification standards, as the saying goes, the devil is in the details. How do you define a sustainable forest, and in what ways are management activities documented and recognized in the marketplace?

Most agree that “sustainable” means meeting the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In 1998, at a conference in Montreal, the United Nations set about to develop criteria and indicators by which sustainable forests could be independently verified – now known as the “Montreal Process.” These criteria included:

1. Conservation of biological diversity
2. Maintenance of productive capacity of forest ecosystems
3. Maintenance of forest ecosystem health and vitality
4. Conservation and maintenance of soil and water resources
5. Maintenance of forest contribution to global carbon cycles
6. Maintenance and enhancement of long-term multiple socio-economic benefits to meet the needs of societies
7. Legal, institutional, and economic framework for forest conservation and sustainable management

Within each criterion are many indicators that can be measured to demonstrate trends for or against sustainability. From these criteria and indicators, all forest certification programs in the United States were born. Most applicable to the Southeastern U.S. are the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and the American Tree Farm System. However, the Forest Stewardship Council is currently developing a Family Forest Standard as well.

Created in 1995, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) is a certification program for private non-industrial and industrial landowners as well as forest product manufacturers. Any organization or agency involved in forest management may be eligible to participate including public forestland agencies, universities, and foundations. There are 154 million acres total certified to the SFI Standard and 2.5 million certified in Alabama. The 33 member companies in Alabama must pay annual dues and also pay for a third-party audit to verify their management practices conform to the SFI standard.

While the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) is the oldest of these programs, being created in 1941, its standard of sustainability is relatively new. In Alabama, there are nearly 2,000 certified Tree Farms totaling 2.5 million acres, roughly 10 percent of the forestland in the state. Nationally, there are over 91,000 certified Tree Farms totaling over 24 million acres. The Tree Farm System is sponsored nationally by the American Forest Foundation in Washington D.C., and in Alabama by the Alabama Forestry Foundation in Montgomery.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is an international certification organization headquartered in Bonn, Germany, with a U.S. Chapter in Washington D.C. There are approximately 40 million acres certified in the U.S. and no properties certified in Alabama. Currently FSC has nine regional U.S Standards with Alabama being covered by the Southeast Standard. These regional standards are being combined into one FSC-US standard which is now in a final draft.

Because both standards used by the Tree Farm System and the Forest Stewardship Council were developed on the criteria and indicators of the Montreal Process, there are many similarities between the two. However, a comparison between the American Tree Farm System and the Forest Stewardship Council’s Family Forest Alliance also reflects several differences.

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	American Tree Farm System (ATFS)	Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Southeastern Standard for Small, Low Intensity Managed Forests (SLIMF)
Certifying Accreditation Body	ANSI-ASQ* National Accreditation Board (ANAB) and Standards Council of Canada (SCC)	FSC International Center, Accreditation Services International
Standard Revision Period	Every five years	Every five years
Number of Standards of Sustainability	9	10
Number of Verifiable Indicators	24	180
Maximum Size Allowed	20,000 acres	2,470 acres
Market Recognition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tree Farm fiber recognized by SFI, Inc. 2. Recognized by the Chicago Climate Exchange for carbon credit trading programs 3. Recognized under Green Globes “green building” rating systems through SFI recognition 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No mutual recognition between FSC and SFI 2. Recognized by the Chicago Climate Exchange for carbon credit trading programs 3. Recognized under U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED “green building” rating system
Cost of Certification	Third-party certification provided to landowner free of charge under regional group certification	Landowner must pay for both a certification audit every five years and surveillance audits in the interim
Management Plan	<p>Plan components include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. title page 2. type of ownership 3. management objectives 4. tract map 5. special sites 6. management recommendations for wood and fiber production, wildlife habitat, environmental quality 	<p>Plan components include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. summary management plan must be made available to the public 2. objectives 3. property description, environmental limitations, land use and ownership status, profile of adjacent lands 4. silvicultural systems chosen based on ecology of site and forest inventories 5. rationale for rate of annual harvest monitoring 6. environmental assessments 7. plans for protection of rare, threatened and endangered species 8. tract map 9. justification for harvesting techniques and equipment to be used
Special Site Protection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sites include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. historical b. biological c. archaeological d. cultural e. geological sites of interest 2. Landowner notes sites in the management plan and manages in a manner consistent with landowner objectives 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sites include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. significant concentrations of biodiversity b. large landscape level natural forests c. threatened or endangered ecosystems d. areas that meet basic needs of local communities e. areas critical to cultural identity 2. Landowner must consult with stakeholders to ensure sites have been accurately identified and appropriate options for maintenance have been adopted 3. A summary of site assessment is included in the management plan and made available to the public 4. When sites cross ownership boundaries, landowner attempts to coordinate conservation efforts with adjacent landowners

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Best Management Practices (BMPs) for Water Quality	Required to follow State BMPs	Required to follow State BMPs
Riparian Zone Management	Landowner must minimize disturbances within riparian zones	Streamside management zones are specifically described in the management plan, included in a map of the forest management area, and designed to protect and/or restore water quality and aquatic and riparian populations and their habitats (including river and stream corridors, steep slopes, fragile soils, wetlands, vernal pools, seeps and springs, lake and pond shorelines, and other hydrologically sensitive areas)
Prescribed Fire	Must follow applicable laws and regulations	Must follow natural disturbance patterns, including its periodicity, intensity, variability, seasonality, and timing
Forest Chemicals	Use as necessary to achieve objectives	Must observe list of FSC-approved pesticides
Clearcuts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ATFS does not limit use of appropriate silvicultural techniques 2. Landowners must comply with their management plan 3. All harvest activities must be conducted with sensitivity to other forest values (water quality, regeneration, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, and special sites) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does not allow conversion of natural forests to plantations 2. Limited to 40 acres with some exceptions allowing up to 80 acres 3. Clearcuts not allowed when trees greater than 100 years old are present 4. Live trees and native vegetation are retained within the harvest unit in a proportion consistent with the characteristic natural disturbance regime 5. A proportion of the overall forest management area shall be managed so as to restore the site to a natural forest cover: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. 100 acres or less, at least 10 percent b. 101 to 1,000 acres, at least 15 percent c. 1,001 to 10,000 acres, at least 20 percent

**ANSI-ASQ - American National Standards Institute-American Society for Quality*

As you can see there are several differences between the two certification systems. Regardless of the system, the concept of a commitment to sustainable forestry is sound, particularly in a global marketplace where customers demand independent verification of sustainable management.

The process of certification involves setting an appointment with an accredited inspector who will review your forest management plan and walk your property to ensure that management activities correlate with the criteria and indicators of the certification system you choose. If you want to learn more about sustainable forestry or certify your forestland, the best starting point would be to contact your county office of the Alabama Forestry Commission or visit the Alabama Board of Registration for Foresters website, www.asbrf.alabama.gov/ for a listing of registered foresters in your area. For more information on the Tree Farm program, contact the Alabama Tree Farm Committee at treefarm@alaforestry.org or call (334) 265-8733. For more information on FSC certification, email info@fscus.org or call (612) 353-4511. ♻️

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