

Certification – the magic bullet?

Alongside statutory regulation and financial incentives for sustainable forest use, certification is viewed as one of the most effective ways of curbing unregulated logging. There are currently more than 50 certification programmes operating in different countries, the majority of them governed by one of the two main umbrella organisations, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). The area of certified forests covered by these two organisations has risen from 12 million hectares in 1998 to more than 360 million hectares in 2010, with PEFC accounting for around 231 million hectares and FSC for around 134 million hectares of the total.

■ Why certification?

Since the 1970s there have been a number of attempts to halt the rapid loss of valuable tropical forests, for example through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES, also known as the Washington Convention), which entered into force in 1975, and the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), established in 1986. Lack of progress led in the 1980s to calls for a boycott of tropical timber products, but this was unsuccessful, especially when it became clear that a boycott would deprive timber-rich tropical countries of an important source of foreign currency, thereby hindering economic development and poverty reduction. In view of this, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) was set up in 1993 – a year after the Earth Summit in

Rio – as a non-governmental organisation whose aim is to promote environmentally friendly, socially responsible and economically sustainable forest use. It is supported by environmental organisations, trade unions, associations of indigenous peoples and the forestry and timber industry and is represented in more than 50 countries around the world.

■ FSC: Ten principles

To be awarded the FSC label, the “good forest management” of forest businesses must be verified by an independent certification body which assesses compliance with the ten FSC principles and 56 criteria. The ten principles include the legal certainty of land-use rights, respect for the rights of indigenous peoples, observance of workers’ rights in compliance with International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, equitable use and sharing of benefits from the forest, reduction of the environmental impact of logging activities and maintenance of high conservation value forests. The tenth principle refers to plantations (whose certification some environmental NGOs reject out of hand). These are to be managed in accordance with the other requirements and help to reduce the pressures on and promote the restoration and conservation of natural forests.

■ PEFC: The voice of the timber industry

In 1999, forest owners and representatives of the timber industry in six European countries who were dissatisfied with the powerful influence of environmental organisations in the FSC and the costs of the audits required set up the Pan European Forest Certification System, which in 2003 became the international Programme for the Endorse-

ment of Forest Certification (PEFC). This enables forest owners in a particular region to reduce their costs by applying for joint certification. PEFC permits environmental and social organisations to be involved, but they cannot outvote the representatives of the forest owners and the timber industry. National certification systems can apply to be accredited by PEFC; schemes thus accredited include the Sustainable Forest Initiative (SFI; USA), Cerflor (Brazil), MTCC (Malaysia) and the Australian Forest Standard (AFS).

■ Weaknesses

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, eight percent of forest land worldwide is certified, the majority of it in the industrialised countries. Thus in 2007 around 50 percent of European and 34 percent of North American forests were certified, but in Latin America the figure was only one percent, in Africa 0.4 percent and in Asia 0.3 percent. Reasons given for not obtaining certification include the costs involved – especially for small forest owners – and the lack of a price premium for certified forest products in the marketplace. In Switzerland, for example, more than half of the country’s forests are certified, but a survey of forestry businesses in 2009 revealed that only 13 percent of them are able to command a premium for certified wood. The awarding practices of the two umbrella organisations also come under criticism. For example, environmental organisations complain that the PEFC system is based not on advance monitoring but only on later sampling (which reduces the costs), that the timber industry has undue influence and that too little attention is paid to social considerations. The FSC is accused of having awarded its label to companies that convert primary forest into plantations and use hazardous pesticides. There have also been reports of certified companies using illegal logging practices and abusing the rights of indigenous peoples. In some cases this has led to withdrawal of certification. (sri)



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The majority of NGOs view the FSC label as the only credible forest certification scheme.

For more information see:
www.fsc.org; www.pefc.org