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New Certification Seen as Key to Better Forestry Practices

By Andy Marshall

Provincial conservationists still pin their hopes for better-managed forests here on a new-to Alberta lumber certification process they believe can force change on a wary forestry industry. But, like a young sapling struggling to survive in thick undergrowth, the so-called Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification is in danger of being submerged in the tangle of other forestry audit processes being touted by industry and government officials.

A crucial meeting of industry, environmental, academic, legal and Aboriginal representatives, scheduled for Feb. 20 and 21, aims at continuing the process of clarifying standards for harvesting and managing Alberta's boreal forests under the FSC international certification program.

"If people's concerns are based on better forest management on the ground, then the choice is clearly FSC," says Helene Walsh, head of Albertans for a Wild Chinchaga and co-ordinator of the environmental chamber of FSC's Alberta chapter. "But, the industry has a lot of capacity to muddy the waters if they don't want to change."

Although the forestry industry is keeping an active brief on the progress of FSC in Alberta and accept that some third-party auditing of its management practices is inevitable, many companies are turning to other stamps of approval on their products which they believe can persuade consumers they're doing the right thing for sustainable forests.

"Everyone is very curious about what will be developed," says Neil Shelly, director of environmental affairs for the Alberta Forest Products Association. "We see the drive for more certified wood, but will it be exclusively FSC? The trend may not be like that."

The Canadian Standards Association (CSA), the International Standards Organization 14,001 (ISO) and the U.S.-based Sustainable Forests Initiative (SFI) are chief among other certification processes under close study by the industry.

The provincial government has also taken a guarded stance to FSC. Although implementation of FSC in Alberta will be impossible without government backing, a spokesman for Sustainable Resource Development Minister Mike Cardinal points to the other programs and notes "it's up to each company as to the final process they use." If the entire world accepted FSC certification," says Robert Storrier, "obviously we'd be forced to follow suit." In the meantime, the department will remain just interested observers to the discussions.

The swing to some form of certification is in response to the growing numbers of consumers throughout the world insisting on stricter rules for forest harvesting and, in some cases, threatening to boycott products from companies unable to demonstrate practices that defend the integrity of forests and biodiversity within them. As a result, several large retailers, including IKEA, Home Depot and Lowes, give buying preference to wood suppliers who are FSC certified.

Founded in 1993 to balance social, environmental, economic and Aboriginal interests, the Mexico-based, non-profit Forest Stewardship Council has 10 general principles for measuring forest management. An estimated seven per cent of the world's industrial wood consumption is FSC certified. Its strength, say





supporters, is that it is the only program recognized worldwide by environmental groups, governments, forestry companies, wood retailers and consumer groups.

However, a report last year for Alberta conservation groups has identified two significant barriers for implementation of FSC here that require government intervention. The first is the need to set aside large protected areas in at least six forest subregions in Alberta. These areas would serve as benchmarks or comparisons for scientific study looking into impacts in harvested areas. A recent report by the Alberta Centre for Boreal Research (www.borealcentre.ca; sponsored by several organizations, including the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society) says these areas need to be at least 5,000 square kilometres to capture all the ecological diversity present in the regions.

With the province adamant that its dedication of about 19,000 square kilometres of land under Special Places concluded the need for any further protected areas, this requirement "may be the deal-breaker for getting anything done," says Sunpine spokesman Tom Daniels. "The government has to be involved."

Almost as daunting is the requirement by FSC for long-term and clearly defined tenure of lands being forested. It is inconceivable that Alberta's current system of oil and gas leases would be overturned. And, while closer co-operation between the two industries is occurring, those involved cannot see how that requirement can be met. "That's beyond our control. The overall land managers are the provincial government," says industry spokesman Shelly.

AWA president Cliff Wallis proposes the forestry industry either gains full control of the lands it operates in, or a joint forestry-energy industry management board oversees them. And, although the energy sector is a "big elephant compared to the tiny gnat of the forest industry, enough of the oil and gas companies know they have to work responsibly."

The Alberta Centre for Boreal Research studies suggest that seismic work and drilling of wells result in about the same amount of clearing as from timber harvesting. Because regeneration is inadequate, seismic activities lead to a "substantial" and progressive loss of mature forest, according to a centre report. Seismic lines provide access routes into the forest for off-road vehicles, further exacerbating the serious impacts on the soil and vegetation.

Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) spokesman David Luff points to changing technology that can greatly reduce the seismic footprint, but environmentalists say that technology is still little used, particularly in the northern forests. He and forestry spokesman also contend they are working better together to avoid duplication of their impacts on the forests. One example is their sharing of access to production areas.

"A lot more integration is going on," adds the government's Storrier. "The industries are addressing that issue through the integrated resource management plan."

Brent Rabik, a spokesman for Alberta Pacific, described by environmentalists as among the more enlightened forest companies, warns both industries still have a long way to go to do a better job. If they want long-term stable access to the resources, "they have to recognize they do create issues out there, whether it's air pollution or fragmentation of the ecosystem," he says. "There are threats to their business."

Environmentalists, meanwhile, have a long list of forestry industry practices they hope can be changed through the FSC certification process. Top of the list is the targeting by the industry of old-growth stands and the industry's alleged failure to maintain biodiversity. "The ecological integrity of Alberta's forests is being seriously impaired through progressive fragmentation and loss of habitat resulting from the





activities of the forest and petroleum industries," states a report on FSC certification done for the AWA, CPAWS, Albertans for a Wild Chinchaga and the Federation of Alberta Naturalists.

Under the sustained-yield management (SYM) approach to forest management, promoted by the Alberta government, the overall effect is to "reduce habitat diversity by producing a forest that is younger and simpler than natural-origin forests," says the report. "Reduced habitat diversity will, in turn, result in decreased species diversity."

Companies need to leave far more materials in their clear-cut blocks, explains Helene Walsh. And, they should use less invasive techniques for re-establishing the forest. The scarification (heavy-duty scraping and ploughing over) of cut areas, the burning of unused materials and applications of herbicides are among specific techniques under fire. Planting conifer saplings to replace 100-year-old trees undermines the natural succession process of forest growth and encourages a monoculture, says Walsh. "The industry is more interested in maintaining fibre supplies, as opposed to biodiversity."

"Reforestation is not restoration," says Richard Thomas, an environmental consultant, who has tried to track the impact of declining habitat on migratory bird numbers. He worries that no one is quantifying the losses of old-growth stands. While he has little faith in forest certification, even FSC, to improve methods, he says public discussion about the process "has got them (the industry) worried."

AWA's Cliff Wallis understands well the potential leverage the FSC certification process can apply. "We're using the market place to apply pressure . . . the threat of a loss of market is enough to get the industry to the table."

Giant retailer IKEA, which buys wood throughout the world, including some indirectly from Weldwood in Alberta, is committed to FSC certification, says its Canadian retail environmental co-ordinator Greg Priest.

"Consumers are starting to ask about certification . . . because we are a worldwide company, we want something that is recognized worldwide," he says. Although supplies of FSC-certified wood are limited, "we're trying to work it through the system . . . if FSC wood is available, we try to purchase that. It's the way we want to work in the future."

The advantage to FSC, Priest explains, is that it covers social, economic and environmental issues. "It's very intensive, it includes all stakeholders in developing criteria, and it's internationally accepted."

Most forest companies are less sanguine about it. Paul Wooding of Canadian Forest Products warns of the drawbacks. He is worried FSC's Canadian standards will demand a lot more than, say, its standards in Sweden. "If there are wildly different standards, then that's an issue for us," he says. "There has to be harmonization."

At issue, for example, are the obvious differences between Canadian and European forests and the challenges to maintain biodiversity in stands being cut for the first time here, as opposed to the second- or third-growth timber there. His company has seen difficulties with FSC certification in British Columbia and the clash of FSC principles with Aboriginal land claims.

Canfor plans to take part in the February meeting, but it doesn't see a big difference between the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) certification and FSC. It also looks to the International Standards Organization (ISO) as a "good platform on which to build other certification systems, but we recognize that it doesn't necessarily address issues of sustainable forest management," says Wooding.





Even though it has undergone several "successful" audits of its forest management, including the industry's own Forest Care program, Spray Lake Sawmills is closely monitoring FSC's development of standards, says its planning forester Ed Kulcsar. He sees difficulties in setting an appropriate definition of old-growth forest, noting that "it is important to have access to mature timber and those trees that are large enough to process through the mill."

While IKEA does buy shelving from Adwood in Edmonton, which is supplied by Weldwood, company spokesman Aaron Jones says Weldwood is still waiting for FSC regional standards here before responding to IKEA queries. Home Depot has also raised the matter of FSC certification with Weldwood. Third-party evaluations of all the certification processes raise different pros and cons, says Jones.

A danger to FSC certification is that conservationists will exploit it for their own agenda, warns Alpac's Rabik. The biggest challenge, though, will be to adapt the global principles and make them work in Alberta. "The nature of the land base being public and there being other rights-holders on it (the energy industry) makes it interesting how we move ahead."

He also says studies, such as those done by the Pinchot Institute for Conservation in Washington, D.C., do not favour FSC over other processes such as the Sustainable Forests Initiative (SFI) in the U.S.

Walsh counters that no other certification has the clear, objective, measurable standards promoted by FSC. There is such scorn for CSA that Wallis resigned from one of its technical committees, and a letter of complaint has been sent regarding its methods, which critics claim, are dictated by the industry. It has no requirement for protected areas or for looking after habitat for endangered species, Walsh explains. She calls SFI the U.S. answer to CSA. "It was created by the forest industry to have certification without meaningful change." ISO 14001 is not even a proper certification process and doesn't address forest practices, she says.

"We're trying to act in the forest industry's best interests," Walsh says. "If you believe their markets in future will depend on being FSC certified, then we're doing our best to make it possible for them to get it in Alberta." Besides, she adds, "it's our only hope" to protect Alberta's forests.

