



Wild Lands Advocate 11(3): 14, June 2003

FSC CERTIFICATION: IS THERE REALLY A CHOICE?

By Derek Osborne, AWA Conservation Biologist

In a previous edition of the *Wild Lands Advocate*, Phil Clement briefly noted a recent report commissioned by Forest Ethics, Greenpeace and the B.C. Chapter of the Sierra Club of Canada. Titled *On the Ground – Forest Certification: Green Stamp of Approval or Rubber Stamp of Destruction*, it provides a no-holds-barred investigation into the pros and cons of the various forest certification systems currently in circulation. The report examined certification strategies under the Canadian Standards Association's Sustainable Forest Management (CSA-SFM), Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification systems. All three claim to be performance-based. A fourth system that many readers may be familiar with, the International Organization of Standards (ISO), was omitted from the report since it does not require holders to meet benchmarks of sustainability! So how do these certification systems truly hold up when it comes to on-the-ground results?

The shortfalls of the CSA and SFI certification systems are evident when one considers that each is quite heavy-handed in favour of industry. CSA was initiated and continues to be funded by the Canadian Sustainable Forestry Certification Coalition, which represents 22 forest industry associations. A technical committee consisting of academics, government and industry developed its standards. While attempting to work under the illusion of a balanced approach, most environmental and First Nations interests declined to participate as they felt the process was far too industry dominated. A small number of conservation groups, including the Alberta Wilderness Association, initially had representation in the process but withdrew with the realization that a credible set of certification standards would not be possible.

The shortcomings of CSA are further evident when one considers the standards do not set minimum performance requirements. So how successful has CSA been in moving the forest industry toward truly sustainable forest management? One needs to look no further than our own backyard. Weldwood of Canada, a subsidiary of International Paper, recently received CSA certification for forestlands in its Hinton Division. Annually the company harvests approximately 6,000 hectares of mature and old-growth forest and protects less than two per cent of its licence area from logging. Furthermore, despite a significant decline in woodland caribou that winter in the Weldwood forest management area, the company continued to clearcut those same forests used by the caribou. In spite of formal complaints from conservation groups like the Alberta Wilderness Association, CSA took no meaningful actions to address the conflict between Weldwood's logging and the CSA's requirement to ensure prosperity of all species through time.

The SFI certification system has fared no better than CSA in promoting truly sustainable forest management. It too was initiated by industry, specifically the American Forest and Paper Association (AF&PA). SFI receives 82 per cent of its funding from AF&PA members, with the rest derived from U.S. federal and state agencies, independent logging associations and other industry sources. A multi-stakeholder board consisting of five conservation seats, five AF&PA industrial seats and five seats of "other stakeholders" govern the SFI standards program. Unfortunately these "other stakeholders" consist of industry interests with ties to the AF&PA. The AF&PA also appoints all board members.

Furthermore, AF&PA members have the option of "self-assessment" in acquiring certification. A prime example of SFI's failure to promote conservation is clearly illustrated through TimberWest's SFI certified forestlands on Vancouver Island. These same forests are also home to the Vancouver Island marmot, a species on the brink of extinction. While TimberWest has been a major benefactor of the Vancouver





Island's Marmot Recovery Program, the company has at the same time made millions by logging forests that may be critical to the survival of the island's last marmot colonies!

On the Ground has concluded that FSC is the only viable forest certification option. Why? For starters, FSC is an international, non-governmental and multi-stakeholder governed organization that receives 85 per cent of its funding from independent, philanthropic foundations, with substantial in-kind contributions from conservation organizations.

Its standards are refined through both national and regional processes, and are set through a balanced representation of economic, environmental, social and aboriginal chambers. Where possible, agreement is through consensus. At the very least, standards approval requires a 75 per cent vote with no one chamber completely opposed. Furthermore, performance thresholds of the standards must meet with final approval from the international board.

The success of FSC's role in promoting sustainable forest management are highlighted in such examples as the Lisaak Resources certification in Clayoquot Sound and the Pictou Landing certification in Nova Scotia. Both have incorporated lower impact, low-intensity forestry practices that promote natural succession and community values. So is FSC without fault? Not by a long shot.

There continues to be some concern regarding consistency between certifiers and the ability of individual certifiers to be independent of forest companies to which they may provide other services. Issues relating to the lack of First Nation's involvement in Westwind's FSC certification in southern Ontario further illustrate potential inadequacies in the process.

However, FSC is not a static process. Given the challenges presented in the Westwind case, FSC Canada initiated a revised standards process that is now inclusive of First Nations. Indeed, Westwind demonstrates the adaptive nature of FSC and its ability to involve a wide range of players. FSC may not be perfect, but it is truly the only viable and credible option on the table.

(*On the Ground* is available on-line at www.goodwoodwatch.org).

