

Wilderness Watch

Sustainable Forestry: Are Forest Certifications Doing their Job?



As consumers become more and more aware of environmental concerns such as the loss of intact forests, or climate change, a market for “green” products is born. Many consumers want to make choices that won’t be detrimental to the environment, understanding that sustainable practices are the only way to maintain the quality of life that many of us enjoy, including shelter, warmth, clean air and drinking water, and improve the quality of life for those whose needs still are not met. This evolving market for green products has at times pushed industries towards making positive changes in their operating practices to support sustainability. However, if companies in an industry such as forestry can appear sustainable to consumers, while doing little towards prioritizing environmental sustainability, they potentially make more profits. This is greenwashing.

The costs of unsustainable forestry include emissions of greenhouse gases contributing to climate change, the loss of important ecosystem services like water filtration and flood mitigation, and the loss of valued ecosystem components like biodiversity and species-at-risk.

The preamble to Alberta’s Forests Act states that “Alberta is a world leader in environmentally sustainable forest policies and practices that are grounded in science and based on the principles and practices of sustainable forest management.” Decreasing populations of forest-dwelling species like the woodland caribou, old-forest birds, and

native fish sheds considerable doubt about these assertions of sustainability, especially when coupled with the extensive footprint from oil and gas exploration and development.

Alberta’s very timber-centric management practices, which do not fully account for the many important values that forests provide, hardly constitute world-leading environmental sustainability. Instead, Alberta’s forestry industry equates sustainability with sustainable yield – the maintenance of the same volume of standing timber on the landscape over time. Because this definition of sustainability is far from enough to ensure the protection of our forests, forest certification programs can be a way to indicate to consumers that forestry companies are conscious of their environmental impacts. Not all forest certification programs are created equal, however.

The largest forest certification program worldwide is the industry-run Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), which certifies 124 million hectares in Canada. Largely due to SFI certification, Canada is home to 36 percent of all certified forests in the world. This is a major basis of claims by industry and government that Alberta’s forestry practices are sustainable. It is important to take a hard look at forest certification standards and assess their value to determine whether these certifications have merit.

A more rigorous certification program is the Forest Stewardship Certification (FSC), which certifies just one forestry company in Alberta, Alberta Pacific Forest Industries Inc. (Al-Pac), with a large tenure of 6.4 million hectares in northeast Alberta. By contrast, at least nine forestry companies that operate in Alberta are SFI Forest Management Standard certified.

When compared to SFI, FSC’s standards are considered much more stringent “the gold standard” by many environmental organisations in a number of key areas, including species at risk, indigenous rights, protection of high conservation value forests and intact forest landscapes, and prohibitions on forest conversion, as well as the use of

hazardous chemicals and genetically modified organisms.

SFI’s Forest Management Standard (hereafter the Standard) nominally aims to protect water quality, biodiversity, wildlife habitat, species at risk and Forests with Exceptional Conservation Value. However, the Standard falls short on multiple accounts. You may have heard AWA and other Alberta conservation groups recently raise the alarm about some proposed logging in Moon Creek (adjacent to Willmore Wilderness Park). West Fraser Mills Ltd. was planning to log an extensive area in endangered A La Peche caribou range in the fall of 2021. This area is also home to endangered Athabasca rainbow trout, whose habitat can be severely impacted by the loss of forest cover. These logging plans would have gone through if not for opposition from concerned trappers, the Mountain Metis community, conservation groups and concerned citizens that put pressure on the Government of Alberta to protect this important undisturbed habitat. Ultimately, the Government of Alberta reversed the direction of these logging plans following these complaints, and West Fraser paused logging in the area until the caribou range plans are finalised.

It may surprise you to learn that West Fraser, is SFI Forest Management Standard certified. Although the planned logging would have impacted habitat of more than one endangered species, this company still qualifies for SFI certification. Similarly, the controversial logging of old-growth forests in Fairy Creek, British Columbia occurs in an area that is also SFI certified. These examples reveal that SFI is not adequately preventing the loss of valued ecosystems and species-at-risk.

An effective forest certification standard needs to set clear, objective, performance-based metrics by which to assess sustainability. The language used in the SFI Standard to address many sustainability objectives fails to do so by allowing multiple outcomes and loopholes, setting discretionary indicators, and failing to be transparent about what an SFI label on a product means.

SFI's Forest Management Standard is broken down into 13 Principles, 17 Objectives, 41 Performance Measures and 141 Indicators. The indicators are assessed by third-party auditors to determine whether forestry companies meet the standards for certification.

Many of the indicators in the Standard include creating a "program" to conserve ecosystem values, but don't specify what this program must entail or what the outcome must be. For example, Performance Measure 3.2 on page 20 has the following three indicators:

- Program addressing management and protection of water quality of rivers, streams, lakes, wetlands, other water bodies and riparian areas during all phases of management.
- Program to protect water quantity during all phases of management.
- Programs that address wet-weather events in order to maintain water quality such as: forest inventory systems, identification of wet-weather tracts and definitions of acceptable operating conditions.

There is no direction on what these programs must entail, just that they have to exist. This type of indicator is seen throughout the SFI 2022 Forest Management Standard. In fact, the word "program" appears 46 times in the 19-page document; more than the word "sustainable", which appears 40 times. These programs are not performance-based, and therefore don't guarantee any actual protection of valued ecosystem components.

Some blatant gaps in SFI's Forest Management Standard include the lack of protection for old growth and primary forests, and the lack of regulations against converting forests to other land uses. In the fight against climate change, it is critical to preserve old forests and primary (untouched) forests, which are sinks for carbon. Additionally, deforestation contributes significantly to the release of greenhouse gases that warm the climate. SFI's Forest Management Standard offers little to no actual protection against the loss of old and primary forests and deforestation. Rather than require that certified organisations protect old growth forests within their tenure, a vague indicator requires that the organisation support and participate in programs for the conservation of old-growth

forests. Additionally, the Standard allows the conversion of forests to other land uses.

Many of the indicators in the Standard ultimately come down to following the law, with no additional protection added. For example, the Standard requires little or no harvest retention above what is required in Alberta under the Forests Act and its regulations, which are largely regarded as inadequate for retaining biodiversity. Retention refers to individual or patches of merchantable trees that are left unharvested. Structure retention provides an important life boat for organisms to persist in a harvested ecosystem and recolonize the forest as it regrows over the subsequent decades. Harvesting with structure retention also better emulates natural disturbance by fires, which often skip large areas of forest, leaving patches untouched. Structure retention can be as low as 1 percent at the landscape level according to the operating ground rules in certain Forest Management Agreements, including West Fraser Mills' Hinton Wood Products (Hinton Wood Products FMA Timber Harvest Planning and Operating Ground Rules).

Performance Measure 3.1 states that "Certified Organizations shall meet or exceed all applicable federal, provincial, state and local water quality laws and meet or exceed best management practices." Shouldn't these organizations already be following the law, and applicable best management practices? If laws and best management practices were enough on their own, there would be no need for forest certification programs.

There is also an issue with transparency in that the majority of products bearing the SFI label are not sourced from Forest Management Certified forests. Instead, these products may bear the SFI label due to other certifications, such as Fiber Sourcing and Certified Sourcing standards. It is reasonable for consumers to assume that products bearing the SFI label are sourced from certified forests, however this is often not the case. The lack of transparency to consumers around SFI labelling is greenwashing, leading consumers to believe that they are making environmentally responsible choices when they really aren't. The responsibility should not be entirely on the consumer to read through the standards and determine whether they have merit. We should be able

to trust that the largest forest certification standard in the world has stringent and measurable indicators that will protect our forests that provide for us in so many ways.

Sustainability is often falsely viewed as a trade-off between the economy and the environment. When viewed this way, many discussions revolve around how to balance the economy and the environment. This suggests that for us to maintain our current quality of life, sacrifices must be made to the environment. However, these discussions often don't consider the real economic contributions that we receive from forests aside from timber supply. These include ecosystem services like water filtration, flood mitigation, recreation and tourism, carbon storage and climate change mitigation. What value can be placed on the connection with nature that people experience when exploring wild spaces, and the spiritual connection that many people including Indigenous peoples have with these forests and the species that reside within them? We would do well to broaden our view of how we are connected to the environment, even if just by looking at all the economic benefits that our ecosystems provide to us. Long-term economic costs of poorly managed forests often go unconsidered – like the costs associated with ecosystem collapse, loss of biodiversity, water quality and quantity issues, and climate change, in favour of immediate economic gain from harvesting timber. These are among the challenges that we are facing in Alberta if we fail to improve our forest management.

Ultimately, the Sustainable Forest Initiative seems to fall short of its claims of supporting long-term sustainability of forests. The environmental benefits of SFI certification are not what they appear to be. The Alberta Government and the Forestry industry should not be using SFI certification as a basis to indicate that Alberta is a world leader in sustainable forestry.

Note: AWA has been a member of FSC since the early 2000s. Cliff Wallis, one of AWA's long-standing directors, serves as the current Chair of FSC Canada's Board of Directors.

– Devon Earl, AWA Conservation Specialist