

For Immediate Release: January 30, 2008

Sustaining Virginia's Forests through Forest Certification

Feeling the pressure, landowners seek new markets

New report identifies benefits, barriers

**Statement of the
Forest Issues Working Group
Virginia Conservation Network**

[\(http://www.vcnva.org/\)](http://www.vcnva.org/)

Forests contribute, perhaps now more than ever, to the Commonwealth by moderating climate, cleaning and storing water, creating jobs and economy, and provided both scenery and solace. Yet our forests are changing in ways that have profound and long term impacts:

- urbanization consumes tens of thousands of acres a year
- profits from timber management rarely match profits from development
- large vertically integrated forest products corporations have sold most forest holdings
- state agencies trying to service the increasing number of forest landowners are under pressure to trim budgets
- forest health is threatened by climate change, invasive species, and spreading impervious surfaces

In the face of these trends, Virginia Conservation Network (VCN) embarked on efforts to sustain forests, the goods and services that flow from them, and the people and communities that depend upon them. One strategy is forest certification.

Certification of forests and forest products is touted as a strategy for sustaining forests and the life support services they provide. Rather than remain mired in win-lose debates over whether trees should be harvested, certification asks win-win questions about how, when, and where to harvest trees in ways that sustain forests. It is a big-tent issue that engages diverse stakeholders in productive discussions about how Virginia can sustain forests and forestry. On Friday Sept 21 2007 an invited group of 36 stakeholders gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia to spend the day discussing certification and its impact on sustainability. The full report of this Roundtable is titled: *The Future of Forest Certification in Virginia: A Roundtable Discussion by Forest Stakeholders*.

Some of the major findings include:

- Certification is a strategy that works in a variety markets for a variety of products. Well known certification systems include “organic” for vegetables, “dolphin safe” for tuna, “energy star” for appliances, and “no animal testing” for cosmetics.
- Certification strategies for forests and forest products strive to inform consumers that forests were managed and products processed in ways that sustain forest health, minimize energy wastes, follow local laws, and respect people's rights.

- Multiple forest certification strategies exist and are competing for acceptance. Confusion and misunderstanding among affected parties are rife, while the general public is largely unaware.
- Verification by a respected third-party is critical. It adds credibility for consumers and purchasing agents too busy to investigate further. Third-party verification minimizes the risk of “green washing,” which is a ploy to exploit consumer good intentions with deceitful marketing tactics that harm all sincere efforts to build a green economy.
- Relatively few forested acres are certified in Virginia, and supplies of certified forest products are scarce.
- Demand for certified product is increasing, with growing pressure from big-box retailers to “green” their supply chain, with a thriving European market, and with interest from environmentally aware architects and developers. Little awareness in certified forest product has been evidenced by retail home-improvement consumers or by purchasing agents that affect the supplies used to run state and local agencies.
- Currently, forest landowners seeking certification must bear the expense of becoming certified, which is discouraging participation. The cost can be particularly onerous on owners of small acreage, who do not enjoy the economies of scale that allow them to distribute expenses over large areas and multiple projects.
- Certification may have the perverse affect of discouraging forest ownership if it financially penalizes ownership,
- Certification may have the perverse affect of decreasing Virginia’s important forest economy if it raises costs without compensation.
- Virginia should focus on certification strategies that support Virginia’s forest economy and Virginia forest landowners. “Virginia grown” may be as important as “sustainable.”
- Great opportunities exist for leadership by state natural resource agencies and state purchasing agents to help negotiate and motivate a thriving market of certified forest products that achieves the goal of sustaining Virginia’s forests.
- Better integration is needed among green building certification standards that reward use of certified forest product and the competing forest certification systems that supply these products.
- There are tremendous opportunities to integrate forest certification with “smart growth” development strategies that promote sustainability of Virginia’s forests and their life support services that sustain the Commonwealth.

The complete report can be found at:

www.vcnva.org/reports/CertificationRoundtableSummary.pdf

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