

Seal of Approval



Workers at the Big Creek Lumber Company stack lumber harvested from one of the company's certified forests. Photo © George Wuerthner

By Barbara Maynard
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Blaine Puller did not submit to forest certification willingly. In 1993, he was the forest manager for the Kane Hardwood division of Collins Pine Company, overseeing 127,000 acres of hardwood forest in northwestern Pennsylvania. After seventeen years of working for the company, he was not happy to hear from the president of Collins that a team of outsiders—from California, no less—was going to come to his forest, evaluate his practices and decide whether he was doing a good job managing the land.

"Our entire forestry department was opposed to the idea. We didn't like it at all," he says. "We were quite fearful of the fact that these folks were going to come out here and tell us how to manage our forests."

Fifteen years later, Puller can't say enough good things about the process. After poring over safety and policy documents; talking with Puller and his crew about how, when and where they harvest timber; and walking through the forests to inspect everything from erosion controls to habitat protection, the team from Scientific Certification Systems certified Kane Hardwood as a sustainably managed operation. The team—made up of a forester, a wildlife biologist and a forest economist—also introduced Puller to some new

techniques and ideas.

To meet the certification requirements, Puller conducted a comprehensive inventory of the age and species of trees found on Kane Hardwood lands, developed a geographic information system to track data, and hired a wildlife biologist to advise the company on best practices for protecting the local fauna. "We are doing a better job on the ground now than we were before certification," he says.

Puller's experience epitomizes the intent of forest certification. Similar to "organic" and "fair-trade" labels, certification tells consumers that the lumber or other wood product bearing the seal was produced in accordance with specific environmental, social and economic standards. Although it's hailed as a successful tool for improving management of private forests around the world, controversy is brewing over whether certification should be applied to national forests.

PROCESS BOOSTS MORALE, FOREST HEALTH

Created in the early 1990s in response to devastating deforestation in the tropics and elsewhere, the idea behind certification was to use independent, third-party accreditation to create a market for sustainably produced lumber and other wood products. Some consumers, the founders thought, would seek out, and possibly even pay more for, wood that was harvested with respect for the local environment, community and economy.

Today, more than 700 million acres worldwide have been certified. In the United States, some 60 million acres are certified under two major programs: the Forest Stewardship Council, which originated the idea, and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, which is backed by industry (see "All Labels Are Not Created Equal," p. 36).

Even though certification began as a marketing incentive for private foresters, public land managers soon saw benefits for their lands, too. Not long after Kane Hardwood was certified as sustainably managed in 1994, the director of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry, Jim Grace, pursued certification for all 2.1 million acres of the state's forests. Ten years later, Grace says the benefits of certification range from better forest management to improved public relations to a morale boost for state foresters.

"As far as the actual field operations, it didn't really bring about huge changes," Grace says. "But at the highest level, some of our data processing and inventorying was a little out of date, so we really did have to build a more detailed timber allocation model as to how we were selecting what to cut and where to cut it. We also put some money into a geographic information system and an updated inventory system."

Today, more than 14 million acres of public land, mostly owned by state agencies, have been certified in the United States. Two federal properties have

been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council: the Fort Lewis Army base in Washington and the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Vermont. The latter is an unusual national park because timber is harvested on the land to demonstrate responsible forest management.

LAUNCHING A DIALOGUE

Given the reported benefits of certification, the U.S. Forest Service has wondered whether the programs could apply to national forests. In 2005, the agency contracted with the nonprofit Pinchot Institute for Conservation to provide guidance. The Pinchot Institute has been instrumental in directing states, tribes and universities as they weigh the pros and cons of pursuing forest certification.

For the Forest Service study, the Pinchot Institute contracted with third-party auditing firms to carry out mock certifications by both the Forest Stewardship Council and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative on five national forests. The Pinchot Institute's leader on the project, Will Price, says the study was done to help the agency understand how the process would apply to national forests, and to launch a national dialogue on the issue. It was not a preliminary analysis for actual certification and it made no recommendations either for or against pursuing certification.

"I think a lot of folks wanted us to provide recommendations, but that was outside our scope," Price says. Instead, the study was designed "to get the discussion going, to provide some information that would help the discussion and help the Forest Service."

The Forest Service chose the study's five national forests because of both the interest in certification shown by individual forest supervisors and the forests' geographic diversity. The Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania is composed almost entirely of hardwoods, including valuable black cherry. The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in northern Wisconsin is dominated by a hardwood-spruce mix. The Apalachicola, Osceola and Ocala, which are jointly called the National Forests in Florida, are mostly pine, while the Lakeview Federal Stewardship Unit on the Fremont-Winema National Forests and Mount Hood National Forest in Oregon are conifer forests.

Overall, the study authors found that management on the five forests was largely in conformance with certification standards. The study commended procedures for planning, informing stakeholders of upcoming activities, coordinating with First Nations, identifying threatened and endangered species habitat and controlling invasive species.

Weaknesses were also found on the forests, including inadequate contractor training and backlogs in road maintenance and forest health management. The Allegheny National Forest, which borders some Kane Hardwood property, got mixed reviews on the two issues most often associated with the area. The study authors noted improvement in dealing with deer overpopulation, but

cited inadequate coordination with oil and gas developers (see "Blight on the Land," Fall 2007). Other deficiencies on the Allegheny included failure to protect riparian areas, permitting the use of a hazardous pesticide, and failure to work with landowners to identify and protect high-conservation-value trees in neighboring forests.

With the two-year study completed, the Forest Service is now looking to the public for input.

"We've done these studies, but we need to get a better understanding from the stakeholder groups on what they believe the full pros and cons and the implications are," says Doug MacCleery, senior policy analyst for the Forest Service.

PROS AND CONS

The question of whether certification is appropriate for national forests is controversial among environmental groups. The disagreement centers not on whether national forests are managed well enough to merit certification, but on whether certification is a valid tool for addressing environmental concerns on national forests.

The Nature Conservancy, which manages approximately 397,000 acres of Forest Stewardship Council-certified lands in six eastern states, is generally supportive of the idea. Nels Johnson, the Conservancy's director of conservation programs in Pennsylvania and a board member of the Pinchot Institute, says he has seen a difference in state forest management since certification, especially regarding biodiversity protection. Problems remain, but in Johnson's view certification has encouraged the Bureau of Forestry to recognize the importance of the range of species found on its lands, and start to develop a plan to protect them.

Johnson says certification also helped state forest managers deal with deer overpopulation. Even though the state game commission, not the Bureau of Forestry, is responsible for deer management, having an outside third party identify deer overpopulation as a critical issue helped the bureau convince the commission to address the problem.

"It just gave focus that an outside party was agreeing with us that yes, this is a problem," says Grace.

In the same vein, Johnson hopes certification might push the damage caused by extensive oil and gas development on the Allegheny National Forest to greater prominence.

"I think, like the deer situation, the certification of the Allegheny National Forest would elevate that issue and make it one they would need to address more fully than they have been," Johnson says. "It may elevate it to a

Washington [D.C.] issue, not just an Allegheny issue."

Of the two programs, he expressed a preference for the Forest Stewardship Council, which has generally been favored by environmental groups. The Nature Conservancy is a member of the council and has worked with the Sustainable Forestry Initiative to develop stricter environmental standards.

"My sense is that any independent auditing process is better than no independent auditing process," Johnson says. "That being said, I tend to believe that the Forest Stewardship Council's certification process is more rigorous and is more results-oriented. In other words, there is more attention paid to on-the-ground implementation of plans and practices, whereas the Sustainable Forestry Initiative is more of a process review."

The Allegheny Defense Project, which opposes commercial logging on public lands, is not so optimistic about the benefits of certification. Bill Belitskus, board president of the Project, said that because certification programs were initially designed to improve logging procedures on private timberland, they are a poor fit for state and national forests. "Public lands serve different needs than private lands. They are not managed for economic gain," he says.

Belitskus's sentiments are echoed by the Sierra Club, which also opposes commercial timber harvesting on national forests.

Carl Zichella, Sierra Club's regional staff director for California, Nevada and Hawaii, says that certification was set up to improve forest management in places—such as Brazil, or private lands—where there are few regulations, laws or controls. "Forest certification, if done properly, can be a big improvement over existing management practices in those places. However, on public lands we have different expectations for management," Zichella says.

Simon Counsell, a founding member of the Forest Stewardship Council—and now one of its strongest critics—takes issue with the idea that the certification process was not designed to deal with the full range of environmental, economic and social uses of national forests.

"I can say quite categorically that [the Forest Stewardship Council] was very much intended for use in circumstances where there are multiple forest uses, and indeed these are very much built into [its] Principles and Criteria," he wrote via e-mail. Counsell, now a member of a group called FSC-Watch, pointed to the certification of a United Kingdom public forest as an example of the program's applicability to a system that values recreation and wildlife habitat protection.

Counsell and Zichella disagree on the relevance of certification for public lands, but Zichella agrees with Counsell's criticism that the Forest Stewardship Council has not always stuck to its own high standards. For instance, they both said a 2005 certification of a Michigan state forest was inappropriately granted based on trends and direction rather than demonstrated performance.

Another concern cited by Zichella, Belitskus and Counsell is that the Forest Service could use certification to undermine current regulatory standards.

"Certification could hamper the ability of citizens to get better forest management by providing a fig leaf on the forest management professionals that would be adhering to a weaker standard than they are required to under our laws," Zichella says.

The Nature Conservancy's Fran Price, director of forest certification programs, stressed that certification could only work in conjunction with existing regulations, and is no substitute for landscape-scale planning.

"The statutes and planning processes that we have in this country to determine areas within national forests that are appropriate for harvesting and those that are not should always be in place," she says. The role of certification is not to replace current planning processes, Price says, but to provide a platform for diverse interests to work together.

"[Certification] provides that assurance that management is adhering to certain standards. It provides a mechanism for meaningful public participation and it builds confidence in the activities of the Forest Service and builds trust potentially among parties that haven't always had that trust," she says.

Price points to the Pinchot Institute study findings regarding shortcomings in Forest Service management of old-growth preservation, off-road vehicle use and oil and gas development as evidence that certification could improve forest health and management. She also feels it would require the agency to consider its role in the broader ecological landscape.

"I think in the world of forest conservation, certification is the biggest thing that has happened in the last several decades and it could be a valuable tool on select national forests," she says. "It would be a shame if we couldn't see how this tool played out there and could potentially really benefit the communities around the forests and the forests themselves."

NEXT STEPS

The question of whether pursuing certification is appropriate for national forests could be moot, at least as far as one program is concerned. While the Sustainable Forestry Initiative has said it would welcome the opportunity to work with national forests, the Forest Stewardship Council has not yet committed to doing so. With some of its members, like the Sierra Club, dead set against the idea, and others, like the Nature Conservancy, in favor, the consensus-based organization is poised to begin discussions on the issue.

For now, the Forest Service is taking baby steps forward.

"We're going to take a careful look at it," says Forest Service policy analyst MacCleery. "We're going to go talk to the stakeholders and the general public and get their views, and then the leadership will make a decision as to whether they want to take the next step."

In the short term, the Pinchot study has given a handful of national forests some concrete feedback on their operations. For example, based on a reported inadequacy in contractor safety on the Allegheny National Forest, loggers there will now be donning chaps and hardhats. But in the long term, the issue of whether forest certification is appropriate for national forests is far from settled.

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