

# CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY AT PACK FOREST

## Discussion Paper: Research Forests and Managerial Perceptions of Green Certification

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*CSF-PF Discussion Papers are intended to spark discussion and dialogue on specific topics. We welcome comments on this paper and suggestions for future papers. The author is Program Manager at the CSF-PF. She can be emailed at [astr@u.washington.edu](mailto:astr@u.washington.edu).*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Third-party, green certification of forestlands was developed as a voluntary tool for managers to validate their management practices to the buying and concerned public. Although the current certification movement has matured since its inception in the early 1990s, there is still debate over its applicability and importance among forest managers and policymakers. In spite of this ongoing debate, there continues to be a general movement toward third-party certification. The four major certification systems in North America, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) and the American Tree Farm System (ATFS), can point to a combined 346 million acres under certification as proof of their wide reach.<sup>1</sup>

While the effort to demonstrate commitment to sustainable forestland management by certifying industrial or small private forestlands is growing, research forests remain largely outside the conventional realm of the certification movement. Only a handful of research forests, typically a focal point for teaching and demonstration of sustainable forestry practices at academic institutions,

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<sup>1</sup>This number was calculated using estimates from SFI (136 million acres in all of North America according to [www.aboutsfi.org](http://www.aboutsfi.org)), ATFS (26 million acres in the United States according to [www.treefarmssystem.org](http://www.treefarmssystem.org)), and FSC (15 million acres in the United States according to [www.rainforest-alliance.org](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org)). Additionally, according to the Canadian Sustainable Forestry Certification Coalition, in Canada there are over 169 million acres under FSC and CSA (see: <http://www.sfms.com/status.htm>). These combined amounts total 346 million acres for both Canada and the United States.

have become certified under one or more system. Studies have examined how to better incorporate research forests into the certification movement (Price 2003); however, there are no published studies of the perceptions among research forest managers of certification and what the costs and benefits of certification are for their forests. This study aims to address those issues and to gain a better understanding of research forest managers' perceptions of – and attitudes toward – green certification.

To accomplish this, in the spring and early summer 2005, we conducted an informal survey of Managers and Directors from research forests across the United States and Canada. Thirty-four individuals identified as Managers or Directors of research forests were contacted by email. Most of the research forests sampled were affiliated with universities, but not all. In total, seventeen responses were elicited. Two surveys were administered over the phone; the remaining fifteen were administered online using Catalyst Toolkit's *WebQ*, a web-survey system developed by the University of Washington. Pack Forest, University of Washington's research forest, was not included in the survey.

## ***RESULTS***

All respondents listed research as one of the primary operating objectives of their forest. All but three listed research, demonstration or teaching as *the* most important mission of the forest; these three listed revenue generation as the most important operating objective for their forest. All but two of the forests indicated that they hold regular timber sales. Many identified their forest as having either some ecological preservation role or ecological set asides.

*Chart 1. Certification Type, by Respondent*

Respondent	Certified Under		
	FSC	SFI	ATFS
1	x		
2			x
3			x
4		x	x
5	x	x	
6	x	x	
7		x	x

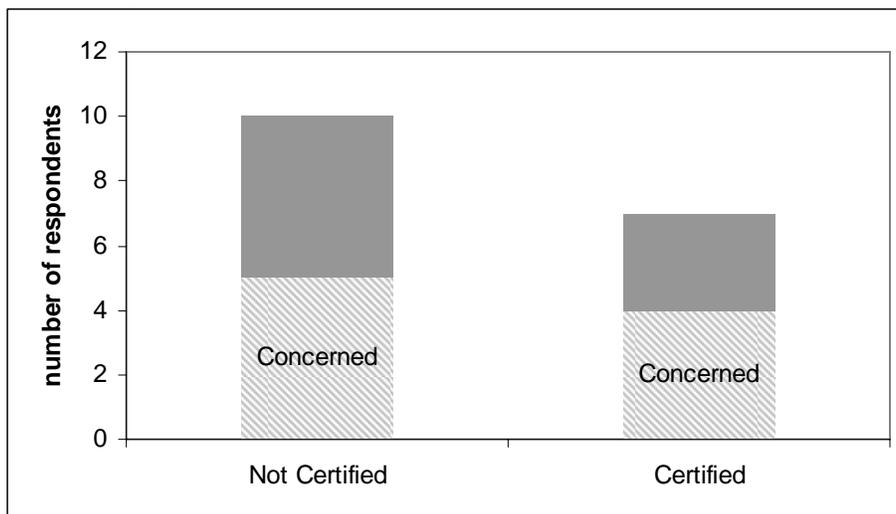
*Note: Respondent 7 is a "licensee" of SFI*

The forests represented in this survey are managed for a variety of conifers and hardwoods. The species grown on these forests were reflective of the diverse ecological regions of the country and ranged from coastal redwood to sugar maple. Respondents generally described their forests as “diverse” and a number of respondents wrote that their forests were managed “according to sustainable forestry goals.”

The survey responses represented a total area of approximately 155,000 acres, with the median forest acreage size around 8,000 acres. The smallest forest was about 3,400 acres; the largest was approximately 32,000 acres. Of the seventeen respondents, seven were certified under one or more system. The respondents identified their certification status as the following: two solely under ATFS, one dual certified under both SFI and ATFS, an additional forest certified under ATFS and a “licensee” of SFI, one solely under FSC and two forests dual certified under SFI and FSC. The smallest certified forest was about 3,400 acres, the largest 8,000. One additional respondent indicated that they would be seeking certification in the next few years. Nine respondents stated that they were not certified or not seeking certification.

Of those already certified or seeking certification, all mentioned they had pursued certification in part either because of 1) *pressure* from administrative or external sources, including environmental, industry, and consumer groups or 2) *concern* over future access to markets. Two respondents mentioned the public relations importance of either having the academic institution be certified or being able to use the certification to counter potential future claims of poor management.

*Figure 1. Ratio of Respondents Who Expressed Concern About Potential Conflict Between Certification and Research Mandate to Total Respondents*



A concern raised by both those that had attained certification and those that had not was the possible conflict with the research mandate of the forests posed by certification standards. Of those that were not certified, five respondents specifically referred to potential conflict with the specific academic mandate of research forests. Of those already certified, four respondents indicated a concern that certification may at some point in the future come into conflict with the research needs. Two respondents specifically expressed concerns about the incompatibility of FSC's

restrictions on use of transgenic materials and pesticides with research. Another respondent indicated SFI had been chosen specifically because it was regarded as being more flexible in terms of research commitments. There were additional comments noting that research forests should be open to conducting research on new or potentially unpopular approaches in order to “verify or dispel commonly held beliefs.”

Other reasons were identified by those who had opted not to certify, including no verifiable or tangible benefits, particularly compared with the cost of applying for and implementing a certification program. In addition, there was a concern about the appearance that choosing one certification system meant the academic institution itself was endorsing a particular certification system.

All but three respondents said increased information on certification would be useful. Six listed a newsletter as a preferred means of communication. Five indicated a desire to attend a conference or workshop. Five preferred casual communication as a means of conveying information. One specified an interest in directly meeting with representatives from the certification systems to provide information.

Most respondents to the survey indicated that certification had little to no effect on their management or that, should they choose to become certified, they expected it to have little to no effect on their management practices. As a result, no costs would be incurred as a result of any change in management practices; however, staff time would increase, as would costs incurred as a result of additional accounting and documentation requirements.

## ***DISCUSSION***

Research forests play a pivotal role in shaping the education and training of tomorrow's forestry and natural resource professionals. They provide fertile ground for conducting university-level research, for field instruction to students and for general forestry demonstration to other members of academic communities and the public at large. Because these forests are typically owned by either a public agency or an academic institution, their management practices are often highly scrutinized and thus may already be exceptional by certification standards. As such, it should be considered important to have the support from, and involvement of, research forests in certification discussions and development.

The varied responses to this survey reflect the diverse climates of different regions of North America and the differing attitudes toward certification. Although some have argued that certification itself will enhance forest management and protection (Viane et al., 1996), there was a general consensus among survey participants that certification did not result in, or would not require, improvements in existing management practices, other than in terms of documentation and transparency. Certification may have more of a direct impact on management practices of forests managed for industrial purposes; the low level of impact reported or assumed may be attributed to the non-industrial nature of the research forests.

The general concern about the incompatibility of potentially changing standards of certification with research forest should perhaps be viewed as troubling to leaders of certification systems and some effort should be made to resolve this uncertainty. Individual discussions with certification

representatives have generated an assurance that *as long as* research is one of the forest's mandates and *as long as* the research is well-documented, there should be no conflict. For FSC, this assurance would be additionally qualified by the exclusion of transgenic materials from any research projects.

It is clear that the certification systems value the contribution made by academic institutions to the development of sustainable forestry practices. For example, SFI strongly encourages its members to provide financial support for research projects and institutions. Rainforest Alliance, and its SmartWood program, is partnering with academic institutions to enable students to participate in FSC assessor training events.

Representatives from certification systems might consider conducting increased outreach efforts or targeting research forest managers for improved information distribution; they should consider research forests as important potential clients. Because research forests provide demonstration and field training for tomorrow's forest managers, they also provide a crucial demonstration opportunity for certification programs as well. Indeed, many schools have faculty who regularly conduct research or outreach on certification issues.

Certifying research forests is not just good business for the certification systems; it is also good business for the research forests themselves. Aside from the home institution being able to point to third-party verification of the forest's management practices, becoming certified should be viewed as having multiple ancillary benefits for the research forests. It can help enhance the overall image of the forest not just among members of the local or the academic community, but also among

members of society at large. This can be important because research forests are often located far from the home institution and, even if not highly scrutinized, may be viewed skeptically by outside groups. In turn, it can also lead to opportunities for increased and improved dialogue among diverse stakeholders. The act of becoming certified can lead to renewed interest by students and faculty in their institution's research forests. Furthermore, it may in fact lead not to conflict with research, but to increased opportunities for research, demonstration or collaborative projects.

This report aims at developing a better understanding of the attitudes of those responsible for research forests toward certification and at possibly initiating a dialogue to improve the relationships between certification systems and managers of research and university forests. Several respondents indicated they thought research forests had a tremendous role to play in the development of certification standards. At minimum, given the uncertainty expressed regarding potential conflicts with research, all certification regimes should take steps to clarify the impacts of certification on a research forest. Garnering the support of those responsible for approving and implementing certification programs at these forests could provide key on-the-ground examples of certification in practice. Conversely, research forests should view certification as an opportunity to engage in new activities, not as a constraint on their management.

## **REFERENCES**

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