



To Certify or Not? An Important Question for Virginia's Family Forest Owners

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Introduction

Family forest owners ask themselves many questions about their properties, such as if and when to cut timber, what types of wildlife to manage for, how to control exotic invasive species, and how to protect water quality. An increasingly common question that forest owners ask is whether they should certify their forests.

This publication can help forest owners determine if certification is an appropriate option. It defines certification, as well as its benefits and costs, and describes three common certification programs in Virginia. It also covers how family forest owners can begin the certification process, lists sources of additional information, and answers frequently asked questions.

What Is Forest Certification?

Product certification is common in the marketplace (Stringer, Reeves, and Ammerman 2010). At a grocery store, some produce is certified as organic; at an appliance store, energy-efficient stoves and refrigerators may be certified through the Energy Star Program; at a car dealership, you may purchase a certified preowned vehicle. These certification programs provide consumers with information about the products they are purchasing. For example, if a tomato is certified organic, the consumer knows something about how it was grown (i.e., no synthetic fertilizers were used).

Forest certification programs inform consumers about the management of a forest. They recognize forests grown and harvested in a sustainable manner. In addition, they may provide marketplace recognition of wood products made, at least in part, from trees grown in certified forests and processed in a sustainable manner. Programs are voluntary and allow forest management to be evaluated and validated against a set of standards. Standards provide general guidance for holistic forest management practices (fig. 1) and product sourcing.

Forest Certification in Virginia

There are three common certification programs in Virginia:

1. American Tree Farm System (ATFS).
2. Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).
3. Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI).

Each program has a unique standard; however, they all address:

- Timber and nontimber forest values.
- Forest productivity and biodiversity.
- Soil and water conservation.
- Aesthetics, recreation, culture, and wildlife.

Each certification program updates its standard every five years.



Figure 1. Certification programs promote a holistic approach to forest management that includes protection of biological diversity and habitats for both animals and plants.



Program standards are broad and are refined into more specific tiers. The indicators are the most specific and measurable tier. Indicators provide detailed guidance to help land managers conform with the standard.

An independent, third-party auditor (i.e., someone with no vested interest in the property, its potential products, or a particular certification program) performs an evaluation of forest management practices for certification programs. If a property is certified, a certificate is issued. Certificates are held by an individual forest owner, a forest products company, or a group manager, depending on the type of certification.

The certificate and accompanying logos (fig. 2), labels, or signs demonstrate to the public, neighbors, consumers, and markets that the forest owner practices good forestry according to the standard of the particular program. The land, management plan, and management activities are certified — not the forest owner (Rana, Price, and Block 2003).



Figure 2. Logos from three certification programs in Virginia. The presence of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) logo on packaging, publications, or lumber indicates that the manufacturer has a Chain-of-Custody Certification. Signs that display these logos or the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) logo may also appear on certified woodland properties.

Types of Certification

There are two broad types of certification: Forest Management and Chain of Custody.

1. Forest Management Certification

Forest Management Certification is the most common type of certification, and it applies to forestland. Actual land management practices are evaluated against standards of sustainability. Forest owners can certify their land as an individual property (individual certification) or as part of a group of properties (group certification).

- **Individual certification** applies to individual forest properties; the owners are the certificate holders. Lands with this type of certification must undergo either a full or a surveillance (partial) audit every year, and owners pay the full cost of these audits.
- **Group certification** collectively certifies a group of properties under one certificate, which is held by a group manager. This structure utilizes economies of scale to reduce costs to individual landowners by distributing audit costs among the group. Only a subset of properties within the group is randomly selected for audit each year.

2. Chain-of-Custody Certification

The Chain-of-Custody Certification (CoC) tracks certified wood through every step of the supply chain — from forests to finished products (Rana, Price, and Block 2003). FSC and SFI requirements for CoC Certification offer similar structures and policies for controlling and documenting certified product content. In the marketplace, products made by manufacturers with CoC Certification may have labels identifying the certification program. If the label is “SFI 100%” or “FSC 100%,” then all of the wood/fiber in the final product is from certified material. However, there are a variety of other CoC label claims in the marketplace.

Two common CoC label claims are: “percentage-based” and “source-separation” (fig. 3; Fernholz et al. 2012b).

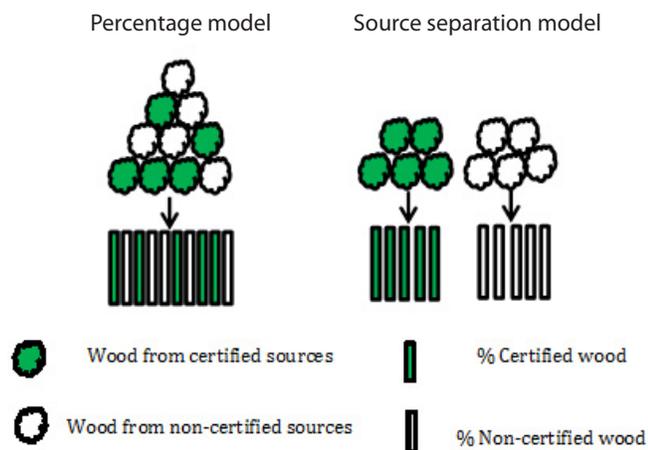


Figure 3. An illustration of the difference between percentage-based claims and source-separation claims (Fernholz et al. 2011, adapted).

- **Percentage-based claims** indicate that a certain percentage of the raw material used in the manufacturing process meets the certification standard. Labels may state the percentage of certified fiber used (fig. 4A). For some percentage-based claims, a manufacturer is able to sell the same volume of certified products as the volume of certified materials they can document purchasing. For example, if a company purchases 10,000 board feet of certified wood, they can sell 10,000 board feet of certified product.

This method does not guarantee certified materials in the end product.



Figure 4A. This SFI label, with a percentage-based claim, indicates that the manufacturer uses that percentage of certified wood or fiber. It does not indicate how much, if any, certified wood or fiber is in the product.



Figure 4B. This FSC label has a 100 percent source-separation claim. This indicates that all of the wood or fiber in the product came from certified forests.

- **Source-separation claims** require that certified materials be kept physically separated from noncertified materials (fig. 4B). The benefit of this is that certified materials are guaranteed to be in the final product. However, this separation is expensive and difficult, and it is not usually possible to recoup these expenses from consumers.

What Are the Benefits of Forest Certification?

1. Increased Market Access

There are a growing number of companies with purchasing policies that require at least partial sourcing of certified wood and paper products. To meet the needs of their customers, mills have increased the amount of wood they purchase from certified forestlands. Forest owners whose woods are certified may receive preferential treatment by wood buyers in need of certified supply. Group certification managers help promote markets for their members.

2. Acknowledgement of Good Forest Management

Certification is akin to public recognition of good management practices. Recognition may be reason enough for many forest owners to certify their lands, but when combined with potential market access, it is an added bonus (fig. 5).

3. Improved Forest Management

Forest owners with certified woodlands are required to have current written management plans that often require them to periodically interact with natural resource professionals. Some certification programs provide increased access to educational materials. These resources can improve forest management.

4. Improved Business Practices

Certification programs have recordkeeping requirements. Owners of certified woodlands are responsible for maintaining and updating those records. These good recordkeeping practices can help improve business practices.



Figure 5. Certification program logos displayed on signs, forestland, and products provide recognition of a landowner's or company's participation in a certification program.

What Are the Costs of Forest Certification?

Costs associated with forest certification can vary significantly, depending on the certification program, type of certification (individual versus group), forest acreage, and current management practices. Some costs may be one-time occurrences, while others may be recurring. The costs of preparing for and maintaining forest certification can be broken down as follows:

Preparation

Management Plan

The costs for acquiring a plan vary and are not usually prohibitive to most landowners. For example, the Virginia Department of Forestry currently charges \$1.50 per acre for their Forest Stewardship Plans (the minimum charge is \$200). Management plans can also be obtained from a professional consulting forester or industry forester.

Changes to Current Forest Management Practices

In order to conform to a certification program's standard, current forest management practices may need to be modified. Depending on the type of modifications, there may be fees associated with hiring a professional to implement the changes.

Maintenance

Auditing/Monitoring Fees

These vary depending on which certification program a property is enrolled in and the type of certification (i.e., individual versus group; table 1).

Keeping Up With the Standards

To continually improve their rigor, certification program standards are updated every five years to incorporate new science and management practices. These updates may require changes to management activities in certified forests. Depending on the nature of these changes, forest owners may incur additional expenses.

Corrective Action Requests

If a certified forest is not being managed to the standard, auditors will make corrective action requests (CARs)

that forest owners must address to maintain certification status. Again, depending on the nature of the CARs, forest owners may incur additional expenses.

How Do the Certification Programs Compare?

While similar in many aspects, the three common certification programs available to Virginia forest owners also differ (table 2). A forest owner’s management goals and objectives and the forest will help determine

which program, if any, is best. The National Association of State Foresters policy states, “While in different manners, the ATFS, FSC, and SFI programs include the fundamental elements of credibility and make positive contributions to forest sustainability. Forest ecosystems are complex and a simplistic ‘one size fits all’ approach to certification cannot address all sustainability needs” (NASF 2008, 2).

Information about the mission, membership, and key points of each program follows.

Table 1. A comparison of the auditing costs for private forestland certification among the three common programs in Virginia (Lowe et al. 2011 and personal communications).

American Tree Farm System (ATFS)	Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)	Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI)
<p>Landowner participation in a state Tree Farm Program (certified under a regional group certificate) is currently free in most states.</p> <p>Annual fees for Independent Managed Groups and individual third-party certificate holders are based on the number of acres enrolled.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer than 250,000 acres: \$0.02/acre. • 250,000 to 499,999 acres: \$0.03/acre. • 500,000 to 1 million acres: \$0.04/acre. • More than 1 million acres: \$0.05/acre. 	<p>Depends on total acreage enrolled and type of enrollment (individual versus group certification).</p> <p>With individual certification, auditing costs may be up to \$3/acre. Some certified groups may cover all auditing expenses for their members while others may cover only a portion of the expenses.</p>	<p>Depends on total acreage enrolled.</p> <p>Approximately \$15/acre for medium to larger acreages.</p>

Table 2. Characteristics of the three common certification programs in Virginia.

Criteria	American Tree Farm System	Forest Stewardship Council	Sustainable Forestry Initiative
Suitable for	Family woodland owners.	A variety of landowner and forest types.	Primarily medium- and large-scale forests.
Calculation of harvest levels	If harvests are conducted, must be done sustainably. Harvests must be conducted in compliance with the management plan and must maintain the potential of the property to sustainably produce forest products and other benefits.	Requires sustainable harvests. Average annual harvest level over rolling periods of no more than 10 years cannot exceed the calculated sustained yield harvest.	Requires sustainable harvests. Periodic updates of forest inventory and recalculation of planned harvests to account for changes in productivity are required.
Chemical use	Landowner must consider integrated pest management options. Requires that pesticides used (typically herbicides and insecticides) be approved by the Environmental Protection Agency and applied, stored, and disposed of in accordance with EPA-approved labels and by persons appropriately trained or licensed and supervised.	Prefers a nonchemical approach. Pesticides that are persistent, toxic, or whose derivatives remain biologically active and accumulate in the food chain are prohibited. If nonchemical approaches are not feasible, use the least environmentally damaging formulation. No products on the FSC list of highly hazardous pesticides are allowed.	Chemical use in general should be minimized; use integrated pest management where feasible. If chemicals are necessary, use the least toxic and narrowest-spectrum pesticides. Proper equipment, training, and disposal are required. All laws and regulations and label directions must be followed.
Clearcutting/opening size limits	No prescriptions or specifications on opening size.	Varies by U.S. region and forest type. Virginia lies in two FSC regions. Southeast: Clearcutting is not allowed in primary, natural, and seminatural forests with trees more than 100 years old. Clearcuts (in other forest types) up to 80 acres are allowed under some circumstances. Appalachia: Openings limited to 10 acres unless live trees and other native vegetation are retained in the opening.	Allowed as a standard technique where appropriate; average clearcut size not to exceed 120 acres except when necessary to meet regulatory requirements or for forest health emergencies or other natural catastrophes.

Table 2. continued

Criteria	American Tree Farm System	Forest Stewardship Council	Sustainable Forestry Initiative
Forest conversion (to a plantation or nonforested use)	Not directly addressed. However, harvested forestland must achieve adequate stocking levels within 5 years after harvest.	Not allowed except in circumstances where conversion: (1) entails a very limited portion of the forest management unit (<2%); (2) does not occur on high conservation-value forest areas; and (3) will enable clear, substantial, additional, secure, long term conservation benefits across the forest management unit.	Conversions are not allowed except in justified circumstances where the landowner can document that the ecological impacts of tree species conversion are not significant
Genetically modified trees (GMOs)	Does not define or address GMOs within its standard.	Not allowed.	Research on genetically modified trees shall adhere to all applicable federal, state, and provincial regulations. No GMOs are being planted in the U.S.
Green-up requirements	Forest management activities should apply visual quality measures compatible with appropriate silvicultural practices.	Varies regionally.	Requires trees in clearcut harvest areas are at least 3 years old or 5 feet tall at the desired stocking level before adjacent areas are clearcut.
Plantations	Allowed, but not directly defined within the standard.	Allowed, but are subject to additional criteria. A planted forest does not automatically qualify as a plantation. If a planted forest provides the principal characteristics and key elements of native forest ecosystems (genetic diversity, within-stand structural diversity, and between-stand structural diversity), it can be considered a seminatural forest.	Allowed. Management must promote the conservation of native biological diversity, including species, wildlife habitats, and ecological community types.

American Tree Farm System (ATFS)



Established in 1941, the ATFS is a program of the American Forest Foundation. The program was established to recognize and promote sustainable management on privately owned lands and to ensure adequate supplies of wood fiber for the future. The program has since grown and broadened its focus. Today, ATFS, like FCS and SFI, takes a more holistic view of the woods, focusing on stewardship and management of the entire ecosystem rather than just fiber production. ATFS is a nationwide outreach and education network that offers tools and resources as well as third-party certification to family forest owners.

Tree Farmers are family forest owners who actively implement a written forest management plan. Through the Virginia Tree Farm Committee, ATFS offers both a certified and uncertified option for forest owners. The ATFS Certification Program is designed for owners who manage their lands to the rigor of the ATFS Standard. The uncertified option provides an opportunity for forest owners who actively manage their woodlands but do not wish to do so at the level required for certification. Both categories provide landowners with the tools and resources they need to achieve their management goals.

The ATFS Certification Program is third-party-verified by accredited auditors. The ATFS Standards were designed specifically for the size, scale, and intensity of family forestlands. In 2008, the ATFS Certification Program was endorsed by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) — an international umbrella organization that sanctions forest certification programs.

The ATFS uses eight Standards to evaluate management practices (American Tree Farm System 2010):

1. Commitment to sustainable forestry.
2. Fish, wildlife, and biodiversity.
3. Compliance with laws.
4. Forest aesthetics.
5. Reforestation and afforestation.
6. Protect special sites.
7. Air, water, and soil protection.
8. Forest product harvests and other activities.

In 2012, there were approximately 27 million certified ATFS acres on 100,000 tree farms in the U.S. More than half of these acres were in the South (fig. 6). In Virginia, ATFS was the most prominent certification program, with more than 884,000 acres and 1,650 Certified Tree Farms (fig. 7; Lowe et al. 2011). The ATFS Certification Program offers three options to nonindustrial, private forest owners.

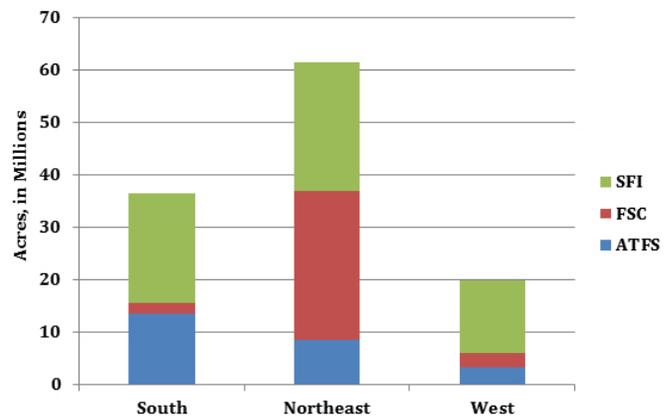


Figure 6. A regional comparison of certified forest acreage in the U.S. by certification program (Lowe et al. 2011).

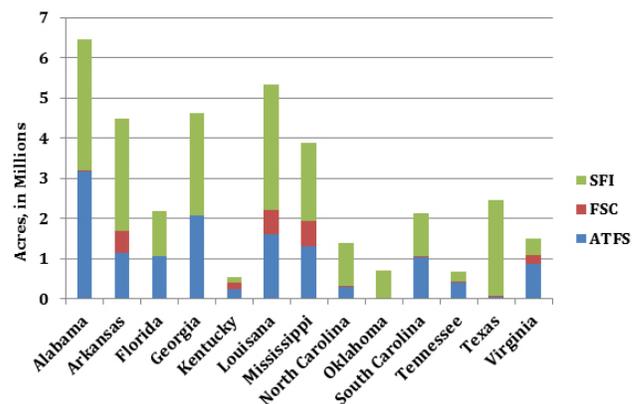


Figure 7. A comparison of certified forest acreages in the southern states by certification program (Lowe et al. 2011).

Option 1: Certification Through the ATFS Virginia Tree Farm Committee

This group certification option is available to eligible forest owners with parcels of 10 to 10,000 contiguous acres. Tree farms under this option are certified under a southeastern regional group certificate that is held by the ATFS national office. ATFS and the Virginia Tree Farm Committee manage the certification process and pay for expenses associated with required annual audits. Because this is a group certificate, a random sample of properties in the group is audited each year. The Virginia Tree Farm Committee oversees most Tree Farm Certifications in the commonwealth.

Option 2: Independently Managed Groups

There are also organizations, industries, or consultants that hold a group certificate for the ATFS, similar to the Virginia Tree Farm Committee. These groups are called Independently Managed Groups (IMGs). The IMG option is available to forest owners with parcels of 10 to 20,000 contiguous acres. The IMG manager is responsible for coordination of the audit and associated expenses. These expenses may or may not be passed along to the forest owners in the IMG. As with certification through the Virginia Tree Farm Committee, a random sample of properties in the group is audited each year.

Option 3: Individual Certification

Forest owners with 10 to 20,000 contiguous acres may qualify for this option. Owners with individual certification hold their own certificates and are responsible for the coordination and financing of annual third-party audits.

Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)

FSC is an independent, non-governmental, nonprofit organization formed in 1993 to promote good management of forests worldwide. It is used in more than 50 countries. Because the U.S. is a large country with a range of forest types, the FSC-U.S. Standards contain some indicators that apply only to specific regions of the country.



FSC was the second-largest certification program in the U.S. in 2011, with more than 33 million acres of forests certified. The majority of FSC-certified forests are in the Northeast (fig. 6), with a little more than 2 million acres of FSC forests in the South. Approximately 209,000 acres are certified by FSC in Virginia (fig. 7; Lowe et al. 2011). Currently, the majority of these Virginia forests belong to timber investment management organizations and real estate investment trusts or are enrolled under a group certificate. Recent modifications of the FSC program, however, make it more accessible to individual family forest owners.

FSC certification addresses 10 principles:

1. Compliance with laws and FSC principles.
2. Environmental impact.
3. Tenure and use rights and responsibilities.
4. Management plans.
5. Rights of indigenous people.
6. Monitoring and assessment.
7. Community relations and workers' rights.
8. Maintenance of high conservation value forests.
9. Benefits from the forest.
10. Plantation management.

For family forest owners with smaller acreage, there are currently two options to become FSC-certified: Family Forest Certification or Group Certification.

Option 1: Family Forest Certification

Family Forests, also called small, low-intensity managed forests (SLIMFs) are either:

- Relatively small properties (fewer than 2,500 acres), **OR**
- Properties with low-intensity management, **OR**
- Managed exclusively for nontimber forest products.

The certification and auditing process is streamlined for Family Forests (Forest Stewardship Council 2004,

2009; Fernholz et al. 2012a). In addition, modifications to the FSC Standard make criteria and indicators more applicable and achievable for Family Forest owners. Both substantially reduce the costs of FSC Certification.

Option 2: Group Certification

This option is appropriate for forest owners who wish to share the cost of certification. With group certification, several owners apply for one FSC certificate. Groups can also be formed with Family-Forest-eligible properties, further reducing costs. The group chooses a manager who is responsible for ensuring members meet FSC Standards. Auditing expenses are shared among group members, and, as with ATFS Group Certification, only a random sample of properties is audited annually. Both Columbia Forest Products and The Nature Conservancy hold group certificates that qualified landowners in Virginia can join.

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) Program



The Sustainable Forestry Initiative Program was launched in 1994. The original principles and implementation guidelines began in 1995. By 1998, SFI had evolved to become the first U.S. standard backed by third-party audits. Today, SFI is an independent, nonprofit organization responsible for maintaining, overseeing, and improving a sustainable forestland certification program that is internationally recognized by the PEFC and includes more than 190 million acres.

SFI certification was developed for larger acreages (10,000 acres or more). The SFI program works with family forest owners through a mutual recognition agreement with ATFS. This means companies with SFI Chain-of-Custody Certification can purchase wood from certified ATFS forests and count it toward their controlled wood supply. SFI companies may give preferential consideration to ATFS wood.

SFI certification addresses 14 principles (Sustainable Forestry Initiative 2009):

1. Sustainable forestry.

2. Avoidance of controversial sources from illegal logging in offshore fiber sourcing.
3. Forest productivity and health.
4. Legal compliance.
5. Protection of water resources.
6. Research.
7. Protection of biological diversity.
8. Training and education.
9. Aesthetics and recreation.
10. Public involvement.
11. Protection of special sites.
12. Transparency.
13. Responsible fiber-sourcing practices.
14. Continual improvement.

In 2011, SFI was the largest certification program in the U.S. (59 million acres) and in the South (more than 20 million acres; fig. 6). It was the second largest certification program in Virginia (fig. 7; Lowe et al. 2011).

The SFI program is implemented at the state level through SFI Implementation Committees (SICs). SICs are composed of representatives from member companies, state natural resource and conservation agencies, and university representatives. The SICs are charged with monitoring inconsistent practices, collecting dues from member companies, and outreach and education related to sustainable forest management for forest owners, loggers, and the general public.

How Can Family Forest Owners Certify Their Woodlands?

Table 3 on page 12 summarizes the process for initiating certification for each of the three programs. Additional information on certification can be obtained from Dovetail Partners Inc. and the Pinchot Institute for Conservation. For more information and examples of group certification, owners can contact the Center for Forest & Wood Certification, a group certification pro-

gram managed by the University of Kentucky, Columbia Forest Products, or The Nature Conservancy.

Regardless of which program a forest owner chooses, a written forest management plan is required (fig. 8). In Virginia, owners can contact the Virginia Department of Forestry or the Association of Consulting Foresters to get started. To ensure the proper components are addressed in the plan, the forester who writes the plan should be made aware of the intention to certify. See the Additional Resources section for contact information.

Family forest owners considering forest certification can find more information about the specific programs on their websites. Contact information for each program is provided in the Additional Resources section.

est products companies need to purchase more wood from certified forests. However, only about 97 million acres, 12.9 percent of forests in the U.S., are certified. Demand for certified wood may soon exceed supply, which could favor raw material owned by forest owners with certified woodlands.

Should family forest owners certify their woodlands? If an owner is seeking access to markets, external recognition that they are doing a good job with management, or additional opportunities to improve their management, then the answer may be yes. Family forest owners should use the information presented in this publication to answer that question.



Figure 8. The first step toward certification is obtaining a forest management plan from a professional forester. Planning provides a roadmap for forest owners to follow, helping them reach their forest management goals and improving the health and productivity of their land.

Conclusion

Forest certification is a market-based, voluntary system used to assure that trees are grown, harvested, and processed in a responsible manner.

Many businesses that purchase wood products (e.g., business supply stores and large publishing companies) are asking manufacturers to increase the amount of certified fiber used to make their products. This means for-

Table 3. Process for obtaining and maintaining private forest management certification with one of the three certification programs in Virginia.*

American Tree Farm System	
Obtaining	<p>To participate in the Virginia Tree Farm Certification Program (and be certified under the southeast regional certificate):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Complete the application form available at www.treefarmssystem.org/joinatfs or call 202-463-2462 to have a form mailed. Send the completed application to the Virginia Tree Farm committee. 2. A Virginia Tree Farm inspector will make arrangements to visit the property and review the management plan. 3. If certified, the landowner will receive a Certified Tree Farm sign to post on the property. Certification is valid for five years. <p>To form an independent managed group or apply for an individual certificate, contact the ATFS.</p>
Maintaining	<p>Properties certified under the southeast regional certificate will be inspected at least once every five years by a Virginia Tree Farm inspector. In order to maintain ATFS certification, management plans must be kept updated and management activities must be implemented according to the timeline in the management plan. Landowners must be willing to have their plans and activities updated to meet the current ATFS Standard. Full recertification is required every five years.</p>
Forest Stewardship Council	
Obtaining	<p>To participate in FSC Family Forest Certification:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contact an FSC accreditation body listed at https://us.fsc.org/certifying-bodies-in-the-us.221.htm or call 612-353-4511 for a list. Landowners decide which certification body to work with. A signed agreement will be required. 2. An auditor from the selected accreditation body will visit the property to conduct a pre-audit. 3. The results of the pre-audit are compiled in a report that will be used to determine if the property can be certified. 4. If the pre-audit report is favorable, the property will be certified, and the landowner will receive a certificate, valid for five years. <p>To participate in group certification in Virginia, contact The Nature Conservancy or Columbia Forest Products.</p>
Maintaining	<p>Properties certified as Family Forests or under a group certificate will be audited annually. However, depending on circumstances, annual site visits may not be required. All properties must have a full recertification every five years.</p>

Table 3. continued

Sustainable Forestry Initiative	
Obtaining	<p>To participate in the SFI Program:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Complete and submit the application available at www.sfiprogram.org/files/pdf/SFI_Licensing_Application.pdf or call 202-596-3450 to have a form mailed. 2. Once SFI approves the application, the organization contacts an accredited certification body (a list is posted at www.sfiprogram.org/files/pdf/CertificationBodies.pdf). 3. The landowner implements their management plan in accordance with the SFI 2010-2014 Standard. 4. The certification body completes an onsite audit to verify that operations meet the requirements of the standard. The audit generally takes two to four days and involves a team including a lead auditor, technical experts in areas such as plant and wildlife ecology, conservation, forestry, and hydrology; knowledge of a region's socio-demographics and cultural issues; and other expertise. The team performs a forest audit verifying that requirements are being performed on the ground and a desk audit verifying that required plans and documentation are in place. 5. Once the certification body approves the certification, it prepares a public summary document that the participant submits to SFI to post on the SFI website.
Maintaining	<p>Certified program participants must complete surveillance audits every 12 months to verify ongoing conformance to the SFI Standard, with a full recertification every three years.</p>

**All three programs require a forest management plan written by a professional forester. The plan must address the specific standards of a certification program and be appropriately implemented. In Virginia, forest owners can begin this process by contacting the Virginia Department of Forestry or the Association of Consulting Foresters. Forest Stewardship, Tree Farm, and Conservation Activity are three equivalent types of plans that allow Virginia forest owners to initiate the certification process.*

Frequently Asked Questions About Forest Certification

1. Is forest certification a government program?

No. Forest certification is a voluntary, market-based agreement between a landowner and a certification program. All three programs described in this publication are independent, private, non-profit organizations. Certifying your forest does not give the government any control or ownership. However, employees of state and federal natural resources agencies, like the Virginia Department of Forestry and the U.S. Forest Service, may serve in advisory roles on the state committees, boards of directors, or external review committees of certification programs.

2. If I have my land certified, will I lose any/all of my property rights?

No. Certification means the forest owner has agreed to manage the forest according to a set of guidelines. However, they retain their ownership rights and may sell or pass down part or all of their property at any time. By being certified, the owner does agree to allow the property to be reinspected or undergo third-party review to demonstrate conformance and maintain certification. However, owners can decertify their land at any time with no penalty.

3. Will my forest management activities be restricted?

Perhaps. Certifying your forest means that you agree to manage your forest according to a set of guidelines (i.e., the standard). Different certification programs have different standards that may affect what you can do on your property. For example, a state's best management practices must be implemented during forest management activities. Table 2 provides details on the differences among the programs that may affect your forest management activities. If you are interested in certifying your forest, use this table to determine which program best fits your management philosophy.

4. Can I continue to manage the forest myself?

Yes. No restrictions are put on who can manage a certified forest.

5. Will I be able to sell my land if I have it certified?

Yes. There are no restrictions when it comes to selling the land, but the land will no longer be certified on transfer of ownership. The new owner can choose to enroll in a certification program, if desired.

6. Will I be able to develop my land if I have it certified?

The ATFS and SFI program require that harvested/cleared land be reforested in a reasonable amount of time; thus, development of certified land would not be allowed. The FSC Standard may allow for up to 2 percent of the forested area to be developed. Development does not include actions that accommodate forest management activities (e.g., creating forest roads or firebreaks). And, as mentioned in question No. 2, land can be decertified with no penalty, then developed.

7. What is the minimum acreage needed to enroll in a forest certification program?

This depends on the program and the type of certification. ATFS has a minimum acreage requirement of 10 acres; for SFI, 10,000 acres is typically the minimum. FSC has no minimum acreage requirement for individual certification; however, landowners certified under a group certificate are subject to the guidelines established by the group manager, which may require a minimum acreage.

8. Can land with small trees or a newly established forest be certified?

Yes. Certification programs are concerned with long-term management of forests, not the immediate biological conditions.

9. Will I be able to practice plantation forestry?

Yes. FSC has additional requirements for plantations; however, not all planted forests are considered plantations (table 2). Planted forests that provide key elements of a natural forest may be considered seminatural forests and may be exempt from the additional FSC requirements.

10. Will I be required to practice plantation forestry?

No. See table 2 for details on plantations.

11. Are there any benefits to certifying my forest if I am not planning on harvesting timber?

Yes. Forest certification programs provide a structured process to achieve whole ecosystem management that protects wildlife, water quality, threatened and endangered species, and special sites. This type of management can improve the overall health and productivity of your forest, regardless of your intent to harvest.

12. What is the time commitment required to obtain and maintain forest certification?

It varies. The amount of time required to obtain forest certification will depend on the current state of your forest, if you have a management plan, and how current it is.

13. How will my heirs be affected if I certify my forest?

Certifying your forest will not affect the ability to pass it on to your heirs. However, obtaining forest certification does require effort and expense. If you are interested in certifying your land, you may want to discuss forest certification with your heirs first.

14. Is certifying my forest the same as putting it under a conservation easement?

No. Forest certification means you manage your land in accordance with a set of guidelines. You do not give up any ownership rights under certification. In a conservation easement, you give up certain ownership rights, such as the right to subdivide or build on the property. Also, certification can be relinquished at any time. Conservation easements are generally in perpetuity.

15. My land is under a conservation easement. Can my forest be certified?

Yes. Most conservation easements allow forest management activities to occur. As long as no restrictions in your easement prevent you from adhering to the standard, your forest can be certified.

Additional Resources on Forest Certification

Individual Programs

American Tree Farm System

www.treefarmssystem.org
1111 Nineteenth Street NW
Suite 780
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-463-2462
Email: info@treefarmssystem.org

Forest Stewardship Council

http://us.fsc.org/
http://us.fsc.org/family-forests.202.htm
212 Third Avenue North
Suite 445
Minneapolis, MN 55401
Phone: 612-353-4511
Email: info@us.fsc.org

PEFC International

http://pefc.org
10, Route de l'Aéroport
Case Postale 636
1215 Geneva - Switzerland
Phone: +41 (22) 799 4540
Email: info@pefc.org

Sustainable Forestry Initiative Inc.

www.sfiprogram.org/
900 17th Street NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006
Phone: 202-596-3450
Email: info@sfiprogram.org

Virginia SFI Implementation Committee

http://virginiasfi.com/
3808 Augusta Avenue
Richmond, VA 23230
Phone: 804-278-8733

Virginia Tree Farm Committee

www.vaforestry.org/vfa_vatreefarm.html
3808 Augusta Avenue
Richmond, VA 23230
Phone: 804-278-8733

Additional Resources

Association of Consulting Foresters of America Inc.

www.acf-foresters.org
312 Montgomery Street
Suite 208
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone: 703-548-0990
Email: director@acf-foresters.org

Center for Forest & Wood Certification

http://forestcertificationcenter.org
Phone: 855-579-2690
Email: info@forestcertificationcenter.org

Columbia Forest Products

www.columbiaforestproducts.com
7900 Triad Center Drive
Suite 200
Greensboro, NC 27407
Phone: 800-637-1609
Email: rtaylor@columbiaforestproducts.com

Dovetail Partners Inc.

www.dovetailinc.org/
528 Hennepin Avenue
Suite 703
Minneapolis, MN 55403
Phone: 612-333-0430
Email: info@dovetailinc.org

Pinchot Institute for Conservation

www.pinchot.org
1616 P Street NW
Suite 100
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-797-6580
Email: pinchot@pinchot.org

The Nature Conservancy

490 Westfield Road
Charlottesville, VA 22901
Phone: (434) 295-6106
www.nature.org

Virginia Department of Forestry

www.dof.virginia.gov
900 Natural Resources Drive

Suite 800
Charlottesville, VA 22903
Phone: 434-977-6555

Virginia Forest Landowner Education Program

www.cnre.vt.edu/forestupdate

228 Cheatham Hall (0324)

Blacksburg, VA 24061

Phone: 540-231-6391

Email: forester@vt.edu

Glossary

Audit – A systematic, documented verification process of objectively obtaining and evaluating evidence to determine whether specific activities, events, conditions, management systems, or information about these matters conform to certification standards.

Best management practices (BMPs) – Activities chosen to reduce soil erosion and prevent or control pollution resulting from forestry operations. Forestry BMPs are directed primarily at controlling erosion. BMPs are proven methods to lessen the potential damage from land-disturbing activities.

Conversion – Modifications to the structure and dynamics of a forest caused by management activities, resulting in a significant reduction in the complexity of the forest system; or the transformation of a forest into a permanently nonforested area; or the transformation of a natural forest into a plantation.

Corrective action requests (CARs) – Changes to management activities required to obtain or maintain forest certification.

Genetically modified organism (GMO) – An organism that has been transformed by the insertion of one or more genes from a different species (does not include traditional breeding practices).

Goal – Overall objective for a standard (e.g., sustainable forest management).

Group manager – Holds the legal and contractual responsibilities for group certificates.

Group members – Landowners who follow the direction of the group manager to meet and maintain the certification standards.

Indicator – A quantitative or qualitative parameter that can be assessed. It describes an objectively verifiable and unambiguous way that features of an ecosystem or the related social system can be evaluated.

Natural forests – Include old-growth and primary forests as well as managed forests where most of the principal characteristics and key elements of native

ecosystems — such as complexity, structure, wildlife, and biological diversity — are present.

Old-growth or primary forest – Structurally complex forests, with multiple ages, sizes, and species of trees. Typically characterized by many dead trees, both standing and fallen. Production of wood and other organic matter is typically balanced by losses to death and decay.

Principle – An explicit element of a goal.

Seminatural forest – Forest ecosystem with many of the characteristics of native ecosystems present. Seminatural forests exhibit a history of human disturbance (e.g., harvesting or other silvicultural activities), are very common in the U.S., and include a considerable amount of the unmanaged and most of the managed forestland other than plantations.

Silviculture – The art and science of managing a stand of trees to meet specific ownership objectives. Includes all the management activities conducted during the life of a stand (harvesting, replanting, thinning, prescribed burning, competition control, etc.).

Succession – The gradual replacement of one community of plants with another.

Sustainable forest management – The practice of meeting the forest resource needs and values of the present without compromising the similar capability of future generations.

Sustained yield harvest – The amount of wood a forest can produce into perpetuity, where a balance is sustained between harvesting and growth.

Third-party – Independent certification or inspection body with no vested interest in either the property being audited or the certification system under which the audit is occurring.

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