



Family Forest Overview of the FSC-US Forest Management Standard

In July 2010, the Forest Stewardship Council – United States (FSC-US) released a new Forest Management Standard. The update is packed with comprehensive detail, and for casual users like service foresters and family forest owners it can be daunting. The family forest sector is of paramount importance, however, since smallholders own about 300 million acres, or two-thirds of the private forestland in the U.S.

To make the FSC standard more practical to implement on family forest ownerships less than 2,500 acres in size, it includes a set of ‘family forest indicators’. They maintain the same high bar for FSC certification, yet tone back requirements that make no sense for small owners. That means in the absence of obvious conflicts, auditors need not dwell on many indicators that would receive more scrutiny for larger ownerships. The number of indicators that auditors need to look at on family forest lands is reduced about 20 percent because the risk of negative social or environmental impact is generally considered low. Additionally, group managers can address many of the requirements at the group level, including resource assessments and monitoring. The net effect is a significantly reduced cost of certification for small landowners, especially when enrolled in group programs.

The essential requirements of the FSC-US standard that would apply to family forests owners are summarized here. Separate Fact Sheets are also available with frequently asked questions to help foresters and family forest owners understand how the indicators work in practical situations. **Topics falling into the “low risk” category are marked with a “*”, and other indicators in the full standard unlikely to be relevant to smallholders are omitted here for simplicity.**

1. Compliance with Laws and FSC Requirements

- A. Observance of laws and regulations*
- B. Payment of property taxes and other applicable fees*
- C. Accordance with international agreements and treaties that address issues such as endangered species, labor rights, climate change and biological diversity*
- D. Measures to protect land from illegal harvesting and unauthorized activities
- E. Demonstrated commitment to adhere to FSC requirements

Landowners are expected to take responsible measures like appropriate signage or gates, communication with users and cooperation with authorities to protect their land from unlawful activities. Commitment to follow FSC requirements can usually be demonstrated at the family forest group level through group eligibility policies.

2. Land Tenure

- A. Clear evidence of land ownership or long-term use rights
- B. Respect for legal land use rights held by others, including rights established through laws and regulations
- C. Mechanisms to resolve tenure disputes*

Compliance with these subcategories can be provided through evidence of a deed, lease, judicial decree or other legal instrument; communicating with others if management activities are likely to affect their use rights; and identifying on-the-ground boundaries before starting management activities.

3. Indigenous Relations

- A. Legal rights of Native people are protected
- B. Consultation with tribes regarding management activities that might adversely affect tribal resources and to identify and protect sites of

special cultural, ecological or economic significance to tribes*

In the United States, rights of indigenous peoples are generally addressed through government to government contacts, typically agreements between conservation agencies and tribes. Family forest owners would address indigenous relations by abiding with such agreements, such as obeying hunting and fishing regulations and protecting state-listed cultural sites. Larger ownerships might have an additional responsibility to consider how their management activities interact with nearby tribal management plans, depending upon unique circumstances.

4. Community Relations

- A. Involvement in the local economy*
- B. Attention to worker safety and hazards that could cause injury
- C. Communication with others (including family members) likely to be affected by management operations
- D. Incorporating social impacts and regional goals in management actions
- E. Managing for aesthetics
- F. Protection of Cultural, Historic, Archeological and Indigenous Sites
- G. Grievance resolution*
- H. Fair labor and workers' rights*

Family forests are inherently part of local economies. Family forests' communications efforts can usually be informal, brief and non-technical, and group managers can organize more formal input opportunities. Social impact considerations can be accomplished at the group level through reference to Statewide Forestry Assessments or similar state conservation agency efforts. The United States offers a well-established tort system, facilitating resolution of disagreements. Strong state and federal labor laws minimize risk of nonconformance on those issues for family forest operations.

5. Economic Viability

- A. Harvests in balance with forest growth
- B. Appropriate investments in management activities

- C. Short-term financial needs addressed responsibly
- D. Diversified forest products and minimal waste
- E. Protection of soil, water, remaining trees and other resources during active management
- F. Measures to enhance ecosystem services

Large forest management units require calculation of a sustained yield harvest level. Family forest harvests, however, can be based on less formal analysis of regional growth data, age-class and species distributions and other data that informs validated forest productivity models. Observance of state BMPs can often address necessary resource protection measures during active management. In addition to traditional forest products, attention should be given to ecosystem services like municipal watersheds, fisheries, carbon storage and sequestration, recreation and tourism.

6. Environmental Considerations

- A. Environmental evaluations
- B. Safeguards to protect biodiversity
 - Landscape-scale biodiversity concerns include:
 - a. Presence of natural progression stages
 - b. Rare ecological communities
 - c. Old growth forests
 - d. Wildlife and habitat
 - e. Riparian management zones
 - Stand or site-level biodiversity concerns include:
 - f. Diversity of plants
 - g. Local seed sources
 - h. Full range of tree sizes or (for even-aged types) retention of trees in natural patterns. Regionally specific mandatory and non-mandatory policies related to opening sizes and tree retention apply.
 - i. Invasive species control
 - j. Fuels management
- C. Preservation of Representative Sample Areas if not protected elsewhere
- D. Meeting or exceeding specific Best Management Practices including:
 - a. Site preparation and forest products harvest indicators
 - b. Transportation system indicators
 - c. Regional Riparian Management Zone buffers and allowed activities that save hydrologic features from harm

- E. Grazing precautions
- F. Responsible use of pesticides and biological controls
- G. No use of highly hazardous chemicals barred by FSC
- H. Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) banned in forests
- I. Cautious use of exotic species
- J. Limited conversion of natural forests to “Principle 10” plantations or non-forest use

FSC-US indicators dealing with environmental protection go into substantial technical detail to assure consistency from state to state. For family forests, consultation with professional resource managers and or best available databases and assessments from conservation agencies are usually sufficient to evaluate the presence special resources and potential impacts of management activities. If a rare, threatened or endangered species is present or likely to be present, then appropriate safeguards must be taken. In exceptional cases, designation of conservation zones, protected areas or Representative Sample Areas may be needed. Often, observance of state BMPs will be sufficient, but the FSC standard prescribes additional assurances because BMP programs in some states may be inadequate. Regionally specific concerns about harvest opening sizes and tree retention are in Appendix C of the full standard. Plantations of native species with natural genetic variability are consented, but conversion to “Principle 10” plantations (involving radical methods such as planting clonal varieties and systematic competition control) is discouraged.

7. Management Plan

- A. Written management plan appropriate for a family forest
- B. Taking actions that help achieve the plan
- C. Revisions that keep the plan up-to-date
- D. Workers that are properly trained to carry out the plan
- E. A publically available plan summary

The forest management plan requirements for a FSC family forest plan are essentially the same as those for a U.S. Forest Stewardship Plan. The main difference is one of emphasis for FSC participants to take the initiative protecting biological diversity through conservation

zones, Representative Sample Areas and High Conservation Value Forests, especially if those concerns are not being addressed elsewhere in the landscape. Family forest plans are driven by landowner objectives, within the constraints of site capability and the best available data on ecological, silvicultural, social and economic conditions. Management plans need only be as complex as the forest and activities to which they apply. Plans can be made up of multiple written documents – including silviculture guidelines, environmental assessments, Forest Inventory Analysis and Geographic Information Systems maintained by state conservation agencies – that are used to direct management of a forest management unit. At a minimum, site-level information including species and size/age-classes sufficient to guide management decisions is needed. The FSC standard does not, however, prescribe statistical sampling requirements or how to measure forest inventories.

8. Monitoring and Assessment

- A. Qualitative and quantitative (as appropriate) monitoring of:
 - a. Commercially harvested forest products
 - b. Proper implementation of active management practices
 - c. Regeneration and growth of forests
 - d. Changes in wildlife and plant populations, including invasive species
 - e. Losses from fires, pests and other natural events
 - f. Condition of rare species and habitats, protected sites, cultural sites and High Conservation Value Forests
 - g. Forest road systems
- B. Updating management plans based on monitoring results
- C. Public summary of monitoring results
- D. Chain of custody documentation for FSC certified harvests

On family forests, for certain elements of the monitoring plan, a brief, non-technical and qualitative monitoring approach might be adequate to ensure compliance. Attributes such as harvest volume and stand stocking will require quantitative monitoring. Some types of monitoring that are not practical at the family forest scale can be accomplished by referencing

surveys conducted by conservation agencies or non-governmental organizations. Any approach pursued must assure that regular monitoring of the condition of the forest is occurring. Summaries of monitoring reports need not reveal confidential information. Landowners selling FSC-certified forest products should keep proper records that include their certification code and the FSC claim.

9. Maintenance of High Conservation Value Forests

- A. Evaluation to determine if High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF) attributes are present
- B. Guidance from experts on HCVF management strategies
- C. Protection of HCVF attributes through plans and actions
- D. Monitoring of HCVF conditions

HCVF opportunities for family forests can usually be addressed through available state or regional surveys or consulting with resource management experts who are familiar with related studies. These include Natural Heritage Inventories, Wildlife Actions Plans, state economic development plans, municipal watershed plans and the like. In many instances, protecting HCVF attributes can be compatible with active forest management including timber harvests. Other HCVF attributes might need protection through reserves or buffers. Appendix F of the standard provides HCVF examples like habitat for rare species, native grasslands, cave complexes, old forests, fishing grounds, recreational hunting areas near urban centers, and others.

10. “Principle 10” Plantations

If forest plantations that fall under the “Principle 10” definition are present, measures are taken to:

- A. Protect, restore and conserve natural forests
- B. Strive for diversity through the size and spatial distribution of stands, genetic makeup of species, age classes and structures
- C. Provide tree retention in harvest openings greater than 80 acres
- D. Avoid contiguous harvest blocks until advanced regeneration is established

- E. Assure that exotic species in use are not invasive
- F. Restore or maintain natural vegetation on 10 to 20 percent of the property
- G. Maintain and improve soil structure and fertility
- H. Control pests and invasive species
- I. Prevent conversion of additional natural forests to “Principle 10” Plantations after November 1994

Customary forest regeneration practices that involve planting of native species or coppice regeneration techniques do not fall under Principle 10 concerns. “Principle 10” Plantations are generally defined by the absence of the key elements of native forest ecosystems due to cultivation of exotic species, block plantings of cloned trees, and cultivation of trees in areas that were non-forested ecosystems. Other intensive practices like ongoing systematic use herbicides, repeated short-rotation harvests, or even-aged treatment of forests that do not normally grow that way can also result in a “Principle 10” plantation classification.

The FSC-US standard provides a rigorous program of responsible forest management practices. Many individual family forest owners and existing groups that follow U.S. Forest Stewardship Plan guidelines may be at or close to FSC performance levels. A gap analysis comparing current management with the FSC-US Family Forest procedures may show that the scope of adjustments needed to achieve FSC certification is small and readily achievable.

Please visit <http://www.fscus.org/> for more information including access to the full FSC-US Standard.

