

Tree Farm and FSC: Family Forests' Dynamic Duo



by Paul Pingrey

The American Tree Farm System and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) are often viewed as competitors for the allegiance of family forest owners. In fact, the two are strong complements, together forming a compelling set of education, marketing and landowner engagement tools.

Tree Farm, with its familiar green and white sign, has been around since 1941. The Forest Stewardship Council is a relative newcomer, established in 1993. Both now offer third-party forest certification recognition to private woodland owners in the United States who follow responsible forest management standards developed by the two organizations. While Tree Farm and FSC share similarities, they are different in ways that can lend strength to both.

Many Wisconsin Woodland Owner Association (WWOA) members are rightfully proud to be certified Tree Farmers. WWOA and the Wisconsin Tree Farm Committee have a longstanding working relationship encouraging family forest certification through the Tree Farm program. A number of prominent WWOA members have been recognized as National and Regional Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year, making Wisconsin forestry admired around the country.

About 42,000 Wisconsin Tree Farms also found their way into the program through Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law (MFL) Group. MFL is a state property tax incentive administered by the Department of Natural Resources. The "MFL Group" is a subset of MFL



Forest certification audits involve specialists from many disciplines. The man with his hand in the air is Mike Ferrucci, a Tree Farm-SFI auditor. The man on the left holding his glasses is Dr. Robert Hrubes, an FSC auditor.

consisting of about 98 percent of MFL family forest participants who voluntarily agree to abide by additional forest certification rules. In 2008, the MFL Group became dual certified by both Tree Farm (a program of the American Forest Foundation) and FSC. The MFL Group is the largest certified family forest organization in the world.

The Wisconsin experience is proving that the Tree Farm-FSC duo is strong, promoting a new vision of responsible forestry and giving family forest owners a growing edge in global markets. Some people wonder how Wisconsin's Tree Farm-FSC synergy works and whether both are truly important for family forest owners.

In essence, the American Tree Farm System was the first forest certification program—albeit originally without the kinds of third party verification required by certification programs like FSC. Early in the last century, conservation leaders realized that America's private forests were being cut at unsus-

tainable rates without reforestation. Our forebears had an offhand attitude toward forests, but the resource was not endless. Alarm over the long-term implications resulted in birth of the American Tree Farm System in 1941. The concept of "farming" was chosen to symbolize a commitment to the land, a simple idea that could be readily grasped by a country with roots in agriculture. A woodland owner who sensibly manages for "wood, water, wildlife and recreation" can be recognized as a Tree Farmer. Those four tenets, which basically embody the theory of ecosystem management, help U.S. family forest owners fulfill their objectives for the land.

Anyone who is associated with Tree Farm, however, knows that the organization's primary objective has never been "certification"—that is, assurance to outside interests that sound practices are followed. Rather, Tree Farm is primarily a program of landowner education, recognition and advocacy for policies that are beneficial to family forest owners. It

is designed to motivate landowners and move them down a path (no matter how humble the beginnings) to be responsible—and sometimes even outstanding—land managers. For participants, Tree Farm networks share not only ideas but also friendships. As a result, loyalty among active Tree Farmers can be powerful, leading to skepticism about newer players like FSC.

The Forest Stewardship Council's origins and mission are different than Tree Farm's. FSC was chartered after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Rainforest exploitation, not temperate forest management, was the driving concern. FSC is an international organization of forest owners, timber industries, social groups and environmental organizations seeking to identify credible, well-managed forests as sources of responsibly grown and harvested forest products. Proving claims of responsible sourcing to outside interests (i.e., stakeholders)—businesses and consumers rather than to forest owners—is FSC's primary function. They also work on an international scale, FSC being a global standard.

The fact that so many poor and developing countries around the world lack the environmental, social and economic institutions enjoyed by developed nations like the U.S. makes writing FSC standards more challenging. Even in the U.S., however, concerns over forest management inconsistencies resulted in a new 110-page U.S. forest management standard released in 2010. It aims for a uniform measure of quality regardless of what state forests are in.

The American Tree Farm standard weighs in at about six pages, but there's more to it than meets the eye. The Tree Farm standard is analogous to a post and beam construction. Tree Farm provides a framework and roof and then turns to state-level Best Management Practices, federal and state laws, and local silviculture norms to fill in the walls, windows, doors, plumbing, etc. The written documentation a forester considers when writing a Tree Farm plan is actually quite extensive and technical.

The framework FSC starts with is very similar to Tree Farm's. Instead of relying as much on state and local guidance, however, FSC defines more about how the walls, windows, doors, etc. should



Paul Pingrey photo

Certification auditors (center) and DNR foresters confer during a MFL field audit in Crawford County. Pictured left to right are Arvid Haugen (DNR), Kathy Nelson (DNR), Professor Steve Grado (FSC Auditor), Scott Berg (Tree Farm auditor) and Gary Harden (DNR Forester). The landowner can sell these logs as “FSC Pure.”

be built to make a sustainable structure. FSC participants can use local resource management guidance material, but they need to compare it with FSC indicators and take steps to plug the drafts. The FSC-US standard is more prescriptive because stakeholders were not comfortable with the range of variation that can result from relying on local guidance without doing a quality assurance check.

For the Wisconsin MFL Group, the differences between Tree Farm expectations and those of FSC are minimal because MFL begins with a fairly high bar. There are gaps, but they haven't been difficult to address. For example, state and federal pesticide use laws allow the sale of some chemicals that the FSC standard considers highly hazardous because they are persistent and can get into the water supply. Wisconsin DNR takes measures to ensure that landowners and commercial applicators do not use the FSC banned products on MFL Group lands. Both Tree Farm and FSC have higher expectations than MFL that loggers work safely, and so again DNR takes extra efforts to inform landowners and encourage loggers to get safety

training and use what they learn.

To help make the FSC standard applicable to “smaller” family forest ownerships less than 2,500 acres in size, the FSC-US Board activated a set of “family forest indicators” in July of 2010. Their effect is about a 20 percent reduction in the number of indicators that auditors need to look at on family forest lands because the risk of nonconformance is considered low. Monitoring and some other requirements are also less formal for family forestlands. However, auditors still need to evaluate any indicators that they suspect might risk being out of compliance.

Marketing assurance based on a comprehensive standard supported by environmental activists and industry, social groups, and landowners, then, is a strength of FSC. That contrasts with Tree Farm's power in motivating landowners through education and social networking. Good as it may be, however, FSC marketing can fail if an insufficient number of landowners adopt the standard and there isn't enough FSC product to sell. Tree Farmers, on the other hand, would be much better off if businesses

sought their timber more actively. Tree Farm does not market any forest products under its own trademark. While the American Forest Foundation is having some success promoting Tree Farm wood through partner Sustainable Forest Initiative (SFI) and other programs, those forest certification brands have not been as successful as FSC.

While forest certification has not yet resulted in price premiums in Wisconsin, it has promoted market access (as your local paper mill can attest). Interest in environmental assurance continues on an unabated upswing. A 2010 study by TerraChoice, an environmental marketing company, found that the number of products at big box home centers claiming to be “green” increased 73 percent since 2009. According to the McGraw-Hill “Construction’s Green Outlook—2011” report, U.S. green building from 2008 to 2010 jumped from \$42 billion to \$71 billion, or 25 percent of all new construction activity in 2010.

The report projects the green building market will reach \$135 billion by 2015. Type “forest certification” into a Google

News search and you’ll be flooded with other current events. A recent look turned up group forest certification efforts in Viet Nam, Ukraine, China, Indonesia and other far-flung places that, because of global markets, are direct competitors with Wisconsin’s family forests for a share of green markets.

Whether we appreciate it or not, the most substantial and very real economic benefit of having certified wood (not to mention environmental and social improvements) is that Wisconsin woodland owners can sell what they grow. Because of the demand for certified wood—especially FSC—we have seen good markets even in an economic downturn that other parts of the country have not experienced. Just ask landowners in the South.

It’s said that Mark Twain joked that if he had to die, he’d like to do it in the South ...because everything there takes about 20 years longer. Well, envy of Wisconsin’s ability to continually grow certified product sales through the recession has finally gotten their attention. The most recent U.S. family forest certification project is with the Alabama

Treasure Forest Association, which is going through a FSC group certification review in November 2010.

The next in line for 2011 is likely to be an Appalachian landowner association in Virginia designing a carbon sequestration-group certification program. And there are more in the works.

Considering the relative strength of the American Tree Farm System in the South, it should not come as a surprise if they, too, look at how Tree Farm and FSC have worked together here and try to emulate Wisconsin’s success.



Paul Pingrey retired from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in December 2009 after more than 35 years of service. From 2004 to 2009, he managed Forest Stewardship Council, Sustainable Forest Initiative, and American Tree Farm System certification for six million acres of DNR forestry programs. In 2008-2009, he served on national panels that developed the FSC- US Family Forest Standard and revised the American Tree Farm Standard. He recently began work as a FSC-US Family Forest Certification Consultant. He can be reached at ppingrey@fscus.org.