

FSC® US FSS EXPLAINERS SERIES – HIGH CONSERVATION VALUES EXPLAINED



Purpose and Role of High Conservation Values (HCVs)

High conservation values (HCVs) are biological, ecological, social, or cultural values of outstanding significance that exist within the management unit. Importantly, these values are identified to be of a certain threshold of significance, importance, and/or rarity in order to be considered of HCV status – this means that not every management unit will have an HCV. High conservation value areas (HCVA; the area on which an HCV depends) exist within the broader framework of FSC conservation requirements – they may overlap with Representative Sample Areas (RSAs) and are always part of the Conservation Areas Network (CAN) (these are both highlighted in separate Explainers). FSC defines six types of HCVs that need to be maintained or enhanced (per Principle 9 in the revised FSC US Forest Stewardship Standard) if present in FSC-certified management units:

1. **HCV 1:** Concentrations of biological diversity including the presence of rare, threatened, and endangered species that are significant regionally or nationally
2. **HCV 2:** Intact Forest Landscapes and large landscape-level ecosystems that are significant regionally or nationally
3. **HCV 3:** Rare, threatened, or endangered ecosystems, habitats, or refugia
4. **HCV 4:** Ecosystem services in critical situations, including protection of water catchments and control of erosion of vulnerable soils and slopes.
5. **HCV 5:** Sites and resources fundamental for satisfying the necessities of local communities or Indigenous Peoples (for livelihoods, health, nutrition, water, etc.), identified through engagement.
6. **HCV 6:** Sites, resources, or habitats of cultural, archaeological, or historical significance, and/or of critical cultural, ecological, economic or religious/sacred importance for the traditional cultures of local communities or Indigenous Peoples, identified through engagement.

An assessment is required to determine if and where there are HCVs present in FSC-certified management units, to determine their current status, and to define the associated HCVA. This assessment needs to be documented, include consultation with relevant rightsholders and stakeholders, and reference “best available information”. For an extensive guidance on identification of HCVs and lists of sources that are considered best available information, see Annex K, the High Conservation Value Framework.

IHCVs demand a greater degree of protection than other conservation areas to ensure their long-term maintenance or enhancement, particularly if they may be negatively affected by management activities. This means greater attention is needed to determine and implement appropriate management approaches, as well as more thorough monitoring of both the implementation and effectiveness of these approaches. After presence and status of HCVs is established, the Standard requires that both threats to these values, effective management and monitoring strategies are identified and documented. Finally, these strategies must be implemented.

Management activities are allowed within high conservation value areas (HCVA), but due to the higher level of protection, they will most likely be more limited than in other parts of an FSC-certified management unit. Management activities implemented to maintain or enhance an HCV will always be allowed. Other management activities are also allowed when they prevent damage and avoid risks to HCVs, but decisions about these activities must be made within a precautionary approach framework (i.e., being conservative regarding potential damage and risks when available information is incomplete and/or uncertain).

Family Forests & HCV:

The same basic requirements regarding HCVs apply for family forests, i.e., identification, status and threats assessments, plus identification, documentation and implementation of management and monitoring strategies. However, the revised FSC US Forest Stewardship Standard provides a streamlined approach for identification of HCVs. Annex K provides a checklist of information sources that must be considered, and if any indicate potential for HCV presence, then further investigation will be needed to confirm presence. However, if none of the sources indicate potential presence of HCVs, then most likely, no further HCV assessment will be necessary.

For More Information:

Annex K of the revised Standard lays out a detailed framework for identifying, managing, and monitoring HCVs, including in-depth examples of what may or may not qualify as an HCV for each of the 6 categories, and comprehensive lists of resources to reference.