

THE NORTH AMERICAN BATTLE FOR FOREST CERTIFICATION

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Several organizations are currently involved in a competition to become the dominant third-party auditor of the sustainable forestry practices of North America's forest product companies. The Forest Stewardship Council looked like it had stolen a march on its rivals in an agreement with the Ontario government to certify all Ontario's Crown forest lands. But when criticism caused that agreement to be put on hold, the field opened up again.

Une rivalité oppose actuellement plusieurs organismes qui espèrent s'imposer au titre de vérificateur indépendant de la gestion forestière durable pratiquée par l'industrie nord-américaine des bois et pâtes et papiers. En mars, le Forest Stewardship Council semblait avoir pris l'avantage suite à un accord avec le Gouvernement ontarien visant à la certification de l'ensemble des forêts de la Couronne en Ontario. Des critiques ont depuis forcé la suspension de cette entente et les paris sont à nouveau ouverts.

While the softwood lumber dispute continues to dominate the headlines, another forest products battle is being fought in North America—the battle for forest certification. Environmental organizations, forest products retailers and others are pressing the forest products industry to seek “certification,” that is, forest management audits carried out by third parties.

Environmental organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Rainforest Action Network typically ask companies to adopt certification under the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). They have persuaded leading corporations such as Home Depot, Lowe's and Microsoft to require such certification from their suppliers for lumber, packaging materials and other forest products. The FSC, which is financed by private donors such as the Ford Foundation, isn't the only available forest certification option, however. In fact, several different initiatives are battling for dominance in North America—all of them private and all of them developed with the objective of balancing economic, environmental and social objectives in forestry.

A key goal of each of these initiatives is to provide assurances to customers regarding responsible forest management. The US industry mostly supports third-party certification under the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, working in partnership with the Tree Farm System, which is geared

towards non-industrial forest owners. Canadian industry is somewhat divided, with some companies supporting certification under the Canadian Standards Association system and others supporting the FSC. Three companies operating in Western Canada have achieved CSA registration for substantial forest areas—Weldwood, Weyerhaeuser and Canfor—while Tembec, which operates mostly in Ontario and Quebec, has pledged to bring all the forestlands it manages under FSC certification, through a partnership with the WWF. Sustainable Forestry Initiative third-party certification can also be found in Canada, where most corporations have already achieved ISO-14001 environmental management certification.

The North American battle for forest certification intensified in 2001 with a sweeping joint announcement by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) and the FSC aimed at the certification of all Ontario's Crown forestlands. This would cover an area of some 24 million hectares—more than the total area that has been brought under the FSC certification throughout the world in the past six years. Achieving such large-scale certification has potentially huge implications for forest certification both in North America and worldwide. The OMNR-FSC announcement calls for the initiation of a bilateral process “that will result in FSC certification of all Crown-owned forests managed in compliance

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with Ontario law and the products derived from those forests." A March 23 joint press release praises forest management practices in Ontario: "The highest level of commitment from the FSC was based on the fact that Ontario companies are already engaged in the practice of sustainable forestry under the province's stringent forestry laws." It also points out the innovative character of the certification: "This is the first FSC certification of its kind in the world. FSC recognizes that wood harvested on Ontario Crown lands will bear the FSC trademark."

The Ontario announcement offers FSC the chance to bring large quantities of products bearing its trademark to the market, particularly to corporations that have publicly pledged to give preference to FSC-certified products. The announcement thereby provides an opportunity for FSC to become visible in the market place before its competitor certification systems, particularly the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, which plans to launch a product label and communication campaign next September.

The Ontario announcement is now under fire, however, from several environmental groups, including those opposed to forestry guidelines currently in preparation in Ontario which would allow clearcuts as large as 10,000 hectares. Even the WWF, a founder and the most prominent supporter of the FSC, has questioned the Ontario announcement and asked for a clarification. Environmental groups' criticisms have been echoed by First Nations, which also play an important role in the FSC system. Adjectives ranging from "inconceivable" to "ridiculous" were used to describe the announcement.

In response to those criticisms, a clarification was issued by the FSC on April 3, suggesting that certification would not proceed on a jurisdictional basis. A month later, however, Ontario Natural Resources Minister John Snobelen told the provincial legislature his goal was still to get "formal recognition from the international Forest Stewardship Council that Ontario's forest management policies, regulations and practices meet world environmental and social standards." The release of a joint public report by FSC and the Ontario government, announced for April and later May, has now been pushed back until the fall. The report may clarify what will eventually be achieved under the deal, and when.

That the Ontario announcement evidently was premature can be explained by the eagerness of forest certification schemes to reach the mar-

ketplace with their particular trademark. The goal is to dominate the growing market for certified forest products in North America. Control of the trademark is expected, in turn, to enable substantial control over forest management practices. To date, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and, to a lesser extent, the CSA are winning the battle for market share, but they have had limited success, mostly due to their lack of popularity with some prominent environmental groups. On the contrary, the FSC, despite the high expectations held out for it—in a December 1999 article in *Policy Options*, UBC's George Hoberg talked about the FSC as "the coming revolution in regulating our forests"—has grown only sluggishly in North America, particularly in Canada, where the total certified area amounts today to just 35,000 hectares. At the moment, there is a considerable mismatch between supply and demand and certified forest products remain mostly unavailable on the shelves of retailers.

The public is understandably unaware of the battle for forest certification. After all, there is no shortage of forest products, whether certified or not. The stakes for consumers may therefore seem quite low. The battle may even seem somewhat unreal, involving as it does competing voluntary green labels on forest products. But a battle there is, and it engages the largest environmental groups in the world, the largest forest industry associations and several giant retail corporations.

The controversy generated by the Ontario announcement and the subsequent deferral in its implementation indicate that the Sustainable Forestry Initiative will first to certify substantial volumes of forest products and make them available in the marketplace. In response to this threat, the Rainforest Action Network, Greenpeace and other groups are already trying to vilify the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and its label. Other certification schemes, including the CSA system, are being denigrated by a range of environmental groups seeking to impose the FSC system not only in North America but world wide.

Whoever wins the current struggle seems unlikely to achieve a complete victory, however. Like the softwood lumber dispute, the North American battle for forest certification may take years to be resolved.

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