Bothered by Certification

As a private landowner and forester, the Forest Stewardship Council in particular and the forest certification process in general bother me. This is not because I am opposed to good stewardship or because I want to abuse our land for short-term gain. I have two concerns. My first concern is that FSC guidelines are somewhat arbitrary and subjective. This is the nature of many rules and guidelines. For example, why are plantations established after November 1994 wrong and those established before then right? Who said so? Where is it written that indigenous people or local communities have rights to private property they do not own? The Forest Stewardship Council thinks so (Principle 3.3 and 4).

Second, if the FSC has its way, its guidelines will affect the price I get for my timber. This is in effect regulating timber management on private land. Where did they get this authority? In the United States we participate in the government and it makes laws. Where does the Forest Stewardship Council get any authority to basically regulate operations on private land?

One of the reasons the United States has prospered is because our government has secured private property rights. In general, no person or group or society will take better care of what is yours than you will. There will be individual abuses; however, on the whole, “society” does not benefit by telling in-
dividuals what is best for their property.

I know this sounds terrible, in this time of public scrutiny on forestry, but I believe the *Journal of Forestry* is doing a disservice to private landowners, both individual and corporate, by devoting an issue to forest certification and therefore legitimizing it.

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**Premium Challenges**

The December 2003 issue on forest certification and third-party auditing provides valuable information for professional foresters. For practicing foresters these days, one never knows when an agency or industry employer will decide to become certified or when a landowner-client may inquire about it.

An aspect of certification that did not receive adequate attention, however, is progress toward attaining a market premium for certified wood. It is touched on briefly in the articles, but after eight to 10 years of operation, the possibility of obtaining a market premium needs to be reported on with some rigor that goes beyond wishful thinking by the sponsors of certification schemes.

It is my impression that, for the most part, market premiums for certified wood are not available. The exception may be in specialized or niche markets for high-end products, but the vast majority of solid wood and pulp products still are sold as commodities for which prices are determined by supply and demand, and the relative volume of certified wood on the market today is insufficient to shift the demand curve.

The major do-it-yourself companies have vowed to have all the solid wood products they sell come from forests that are certified as sustainable. But the question is, Is there enough certified wood now or potentially available to allow this to happen? And even if there is, would any market premium be sufficient to offset the higher costs to producers to gain and maintain certification? The survey data reported by Hartsfield and Ostermeier in the December issue implies that it would not, at least not now.
In reality, the southern pine two-by-fours in the Home Depot wood shop are all the same, whether or not they come from certified forests. Would consumers pay more without getting a better product? This is doubtful on a large scale in the long run. Some comprehensive research is needed to answer all these questions.

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Suburban Forests

The article by Hull et al. (January/February) presents a study dealing with forest landowners in the urbanizing fringes, their reasons for owning forests, and their attitudes toward certain practices. The literature citations are almost entirely from the past four years, as if this situation—along with its implications for foresters—were a very recent one.


As described in another article—Rader, T., and L.S. Hamilton. 1974. Aesthetics related to selected forest practices. Special Circular 183. University Park: Pennsylvania State University, College of Agriculture Extension Service—Rader also presented photos of various land conditions, forest management activities, and results of harvesting to all 84 cooperating landowners, with resulting lessons for both loggers and foresters if these suburban forests were to be kept in a wood production regime. I consider our study pioneering work, presaging the “new forest practices in urbanizing landscapes.” Do not people conduct thorough literature searches for some of these old but still valid “chestnuts?”

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