Mexico is one of the many countries worldwide that have begun to develop forest management standards and a certification program. Here, Mexican mahogany is stacked for inspection.

Like a snowball rolling downhill, forest product certification is growing and gathering momentum. The issue has captured the attention of governments, industry, environmentalists, and consumers around the world, and certification efforts and related events are proliferating at a dizzying pace both at home and abroad. Most attention to the topic has focused on determining standards, systems, and methods of certification. Yet fledgling attempts to propel the issue from theory to reality have placed the forest products industry on the cusp of a transition to green marketing.

Certification Issues

Two major debates characterize developments in certification to date. The first and most rancorous concerns who is to judge what is certifiable. Is third-party independent verification necessary to win consumer confidence, or should industry be trusted to police its own management practices? Some argue that “self-certification” cannot be credible in the marketplace, and, more fundamentally, that it will fail to bring about any improvement in forest management practices. Others suggest that producers themselves are the best judge of sustainability since they know the intricacies of their operations far better than any outsider.

A second major source of disagreement concerns what is to be certified. Should certifiers scrutinize what a company does (management practices) or how it does it (management systems)? The “practices approach” evaluates the origin of a product using specific performance indicators, whereas the “systems approach” focuses on an operation’s management structure and the general condition of its forest resource (Cabarle et al. 1995). The “systems approach” emphasizes gradual and continuous improvement over time from standards set just a little higher than those already in place, rather than setting minimum thresholds of acceptability and aiming to achieve state-of-the-art standards immediately. Although these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they are often presented as such.

Demand for Certified Wood

Although a mass market has yet to emerge, niche markets for certified wood have already developed, especially in the United States and Europe. In ad-
ition to a small but growing segment of the public, many retailers are strong supporters of certification. Such retailers can provide growing market "pull" for certification by endorsing and merchandising certified sustainable wood products and articulating the advantages of certification itself (Mater 1995).

Certification programs are evolving to meet this demand. Seven independent programs have certified at least 21 forests worldwide. The four groups using certification schemes that are international in scope are Woodmark, run by the Soil Association (UK); the SGS Programme, operated by SGS Forestry (UK); the Green Cross Scheme of Scientific Certification Systems (US); and the SmartWood Program of the Rainforest Alliance (US). At least two other certification organizations operate in the United States and one in Switzerland.

These groups have certified forests in the United States, Mexico, Honduras, Costa Rica, Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, and Great Britain—a total forest area of more than 9.88 million acres (4 million hectares). The total volume of timber from these and all other certified forests is about 636 million board-feet (1.5 million cubic meters) (Baharuddin and Simula 1994). At least 20 other organizations are developing certification programs, and the number of forest operations applying for certification has increased exponentially in the past year.

International Developments in Standardization

The fear that this proliferation of certification programs may create confusion in the marketplace has prompted two international initiatives to standardize forest product certification: the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the International Standards Organization (ISO) 14000 series standards on environmental management. While the FSC is becoming increasingly accepted in its role as the sole certifier of certifiers, proponents of an ISO-led solution to the need for standardized certification practices have recently suffered a setback.

The FSC—the main proponent of voluntary, independent certification of performance standards for forest management—has successfully created a global framework for certification, including general principles as well as criteria and guidelines for accrediting certifiers. It is also establishing national and regional FSC working groups to help develop locally appropriate forest management standards and to assist in the evaluation, accreditation, and monitoring of local certifiers. National and regional groups are replicating rapidly under the FSC framework, particularly in Europe and the Americas. To date, at least 10 such groups have been formed, including one in the Pacific Northwest, and several more are likely to be created in the near future. The FSC is evaluating the 4 major certifiers for accreditation. An additional 28 organizations have expressed interest in seeking FSC accreditation.

An alternative approach supported by the Canadian forest industry is the development of globally acceptable certification standards for sustainable forest management under the rubric of the ISO. The ISO initiative would generate uniform standards for assessing management systems that companies or forest managers could adopt voluntarily. Certifiers using the ISO standards would be recognized by existing national standards bodies. However, progress was temporarily stalled when a Canadian–Australian proposal to this effect was rejected in the face of strong opposition at an ISO technical committee meeting in June 1995. Reasons ranged from fears that the initiative would directly conflict with the work of the FSC to concern that a sector-specific approach to standards development should not be taken before generic guidelines for environmental management systems are developed. An informal study group will further consider how forestry could be addressed within the ISO.

Domestic Events in Certification

Although American nongovernmental organizations (NGO) have generally not been as vocal on issues of green marketing and certification as their European counterparts, several certification organizations are operating in the United States and working with the FSC. Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) and the SmartWood Program have certified several American forestry operations. SmartWood is also promoting an effort to strengthen regional certification capacity through the Canada—United States Association of the SmartWood Network, an association of regional nonprofit organizations formed to provide such services. Network members include the Forest Trust (NM), the Institute for Sustainable Forestry (CA), the Rogue Institute for Ecology and Economy (OR), and the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute (WI). In addition, an FSC working group in the Pacific Northwest is creating region-specific forest management standards and programs to certify timber operations.

An alternative to independent, third-party certification has sprung up in the United States as well. Members of the American Forest and Paper Association (AF&PA), who own 90 percent of US industrial forestland, must adhere to the association's Sustainable Forestry Principles and Implementation Guidelines. The AF&PA promotes a "management systems" approach to certification, rather than focusing on specific performance stan-
timber be used in their buildings. Environmental Advantage, a small firm based in New York, wants to create a "North American Buyers Group for Certified Timber," similar to the "1995 Club" in Great Britain. The firm’s goal is to consolidate demand for certified timber in the United States by helping the industry use and sell sustainably produced timber that has been certified by the FSC (Crossley 1995). Another private group, Strategic Environmental Associates, is encouraging companies to adopt certification by demonstrating the corporate benefits of doing so. This will be accomplished by analyzing how companies can gain a comparative advantage by adopting sustainable practices; convening stakeholder-learning forums to delineate the kinds of sustainable practices the companies involved would like to promote; and supporting on-the-ground experimentation with two or three companies, possibly rewarding the company with the most innovative practices with prize money put up by the World Bank’s Global Environmental Facility (Crossley 1995).

Meanwhile, the federal government maintains a wait-and-see attitude as its official stance on certification, asserting that further study is needed on the cern, major exporters such as Canada, Sweden, and Indonesia are concentrating on establishing specific forest management standards for their own forests as a basis for future certification. Consuming nations, especially in Europe, are focusing on establishing certification requirements for imported timber. And countries that are both significant timber producers and consumers are emphasizing both standards-setting and labeling for their own production, as well as for imported timber.

North America. Several efforts are aimed at developing standards for Canadian forest management at a variety of levels. British Columbia is the most advanced among the provinces in generating agreement on specific practices to add substance to Canada’s national guidelines and general standards. The Canadian forest products industry has concentrated most of its efforts on advocating the standards developed by the Canadian Standards Association for the ISO. Several NGOs recently began working to establish a national FSC office that will coordinate provincial certification.

One recent initiative by the Pacific Certification Council bridges Canada and the United States. The group’s five nonprofit members—the Institute for Sustainable Forestry (CA), the Rogue Institute for Ecology and Economy (OR), the Silva Forest Foundation (BC), the Ecoforestry Institute Society (BC), and the Ecoforestry Institute (US)—will work together to create a certification system for the Pacific coastal temperate forests in California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska. The council is developing criteria and standards for the Cascadia bioregion and establishing a relationship with the SmartWood Network because it hopes to become the regional certification body for the area using the SmartWood label.

Strong efforts are also under way to promote forest management certification in Mexico. The Mexican Council for Sustainable Forestry (CCMS) is conducting several activities to mobilize stakeholders, develop forest management standards for Mexico’s temperate and tropical forests, and put a national certification program in place.

Europe. In general, the northern European countries are focusing on establishing sustainable forest management standards for their forests in order to lay the groundwork for their certification. For example, forest companies in the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, and Finland) are jointly developing a uniform set of forest management standards and certification procedures for their region. The middle-European countries, which are mainly consumers of forest products, are concentrating on establishing certification requirements for imported wood products. Governments, NGOs, and industry in the Netherlands, Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, France, and Denmark (roughly in that order) are actively engaged in certification issues in some form.

Southern European countries either have not, or have only recently, begun national initiatives to consider certification. Little information is available on eastern European countries, Russia, and the independent republics. The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) is the leading catalyst of certification initiatives in Europe. Due
to the success of the UK “1995 Group,” WWF national offices in several other European countries are establishing similar groups.

Asia, Oceania, and the South Pacific. The three major timber producers and exporters of this region—Indonesia, Malaysia, and New Zealand—are now developing certification programs. In Indonesia, a certification program for forest products could be fully operational by the year 2000. Regional standards for logging forests in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Australia, and New Zealand are also being negotiated, but there are no plans yet to develop a national or regional certification system based on the standards. Japan is tracking developments in certification, but has taken no action yet.

South and Central America. Efforts in Bolivia and Brazil to design forest management standards and certification programs are making progress. Bolivia’s goal is to have 25 percent of its forests certifiable within seven years (Crossley 1995). In Brazil, a national certification effort is under way; a third-party certification organization, working on certifying five forests; and WWF-Brazil is establishing an FSC working group. Costa Rica is considering legislation to make forest management certification compulsory for all wood products exporters, and two local groups are positioning themselves to become independent certifiers. Discussions regarding certification have also taken place in Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. Chile has been relatively uninvolved in the issue to date.

Africa. The African Timber Organization, the umbrella group for the continent’s major timber producers, is playing a lead role in certification and the creation of a more positive image for African timber. Proposals to develop a certificate of origin for African timber have not yet materialized, however.

International efforts. A number of international organizations are concerned with the certification issue as well. The main forestry organizations, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), and the Center for International Forestry Research, as well as for some of the principal international development organizations, including two development banks and the United Nations Development Programme, are all looking into the matter. In May of this year, Australia hosted a meeting on certification under the auspices of the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development’s Intergovernmental Panel on Forests. In August, the governments of Germany and Indonesia jointly hosted an experts meeting on the same subject in Germany. Timber certification and its legality with respect to the rules and regulations governing international trade will probably be examined by the World Trade Organization in December.

Sustainability: The Cornerstone of Certification

In recent years, the forestry community has devoted a tremendous amount of time and attention to developing various sets of principles and standards for sustainable forest management. The ITTO has established Criteria and Indicators for the Measurement of Sustainable Tropical Forest Management, which includes national criteria and indicators, as well as those used for management at the forest-unit level. Thirty-six European nations identified pan-European criteria and indicators of sustainable forest management through what is known as the Helsinki Process. Through a parallel effort called the Montreal Process, criteria and indicators for 12 non-European temperate and boreal forested countries, including the United States, have been developed. In the Tarapoto Proposal, the nations of the Amazon basin have outlined criteria and indicators for forestry in that region. Like the ITTO set of standards, the Tarapoto Proposal also includes indicators of sustainability at the forest management unit level. The FAO is initiating discussions similar to the Montreal and Helsinki processes among additional countries.

The relationship of these efforts—especially the nontropical ones—to certification is unclear and a subject of great debate. In particular, the United States and European Union are at odds on this question because American officials insist that the national-level criteria and indicators developed under the Helsinki or Montreal processes cannot be used in forest-level certification for a variety of reasons, including differences of scale and the lack of performance levels or standards associated with national criteria and indicators. The European Union, on the other hand, asserts that national criteria and indicators are actually intended to lead to site-level certification.

Although technocrats are fond of debating the technical distinctions between national criteria and indicators and the principles of site-level certification, these sets of initiatives are clearly related in that they are both designed to generate information to permit rational decisionmaking about the sustainability of forest management. Threats of bans and boycotts and developments in the certification arena have obviously fu-
eled negotiations on criteria and indicators at the national level, at least for many nations that are major exporters of forest products. It remains to be seen whether national-level certification schemes based on the principles negotiated will evolve to eclipse site-level efforts either by accident or by design.

Whither Certification?
Confused? You're not alone. Since its inception only a few short years ago, the issue of certification has been growing and changing at an impressive rate. What will the future hold for this hot topic? As environmental concerns continue to grow and demands for better product information in the marketplace increase, we can expect citizens and governments to redouble their efforts to gain a measure of accountability from timber producers and forest managers. In spite of uncertainties about the effectiveness of environmental labeling as a policy instrument for resource conservation, forest product certification is certain to play an important role in the creation of incentives for sustainable forest management.

A trend toward the development of both legal and institutional frameworks to support preferential consumer and trade practices is also developing. For example, expect to see increasing efforts to harmonize standards for sustainability at all forest management scales, as more consumers demand a meaningful way to judge the sustainability of forest products relative to others on the market.

Since forest product producers who are dependent on the environmentally sensitive markets of Europe and the United States are the most likely to become increasingly involved in certification, the issue should become increasingly important domestically. Large-scale forest owners who have made above-average progress toward achieving sustainable forest management will probably have a significant market advantage in this arena. Who will have the authority to certify forest products and management practices, what standards will be used, and how performance will be assessed are all questions yet to be resolved.

Literature Cited

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