

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative® Program: Seven Years of Sustainable Forestry

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Abstract

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI®) program was launched in 1995 as a voluntary code of conduct for the members of the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA) of the United States. Since then, it has developed into a recognized national standard in the U.S. with participants in the U.S. and Canada. There are currently 45.7 million ha in the program, with over 34 million ha third-party certified in 2002. Third-party auditors must be fully qualified under the American National Standards Institute (ANSI/RAB) or the Canadian Environmental Auditing Association (CEAA) or equivalent. The program standard and certification procedures are governed by the Sustainable Forestry Board, an independent non-profit organization composed of 1/3 conservation and environmental representatives, 1/3 professional or academic experts, and 1/3 forest industry leaders. An independent External Review Panel, composed of 18 representatives from conservation, academic, professional, and governmental organizations, provides an outside voice devoted to program credibility and accurate reporting. The SFI program is dedicated to continual improvement, and the progress made over the past 7 years offers lessons that are replicable in many other countries and/or industries.

Keywords

Sustainable forestry, national standards, forest certification, logger training

Introduction

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) program is a sustainable forest management standard and certification system that seeks to expand the practice of sustainable forest management in North America. It was launched in 1995 as a voluntary code of conduct for the members of the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA), the national trade association of the forest products industry in the U.S. Since that time, the SFI® program has developed into a recognized national standard composed of program principles, objectives, performance measures, and core (mandatory) indicators managed by an independent corporation, the Sustainable Forestry Board, Inc. (SFB).

As it has developed and grown, the SFI program has had a positive effect on virtually all forestland in the United States and is well on its way to doing the same in Canada. There are currently over 45.7 million ha of forestland in North America enrolled in the SFI® program, making it one of the largest sustainable forest management programs in the world. By the end of 2002, over 34 million ha will be third-party certified.

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Professional foresters, conservationists, scientists, forest landowners, and other stakeholders originally designed the SFI Standard (SFIS). Outside representatives were invited as observers and critics from the earliest stages of the program's launch, when the External Review Panel (ERP) was formed. That Panel, now operating as an independent review and quality control body for the SFI program, is composed of 18 representatives from conservation, academic, professional, and government organizations. Additional public input has been sought through formal public reviews of proposed changes in the SFIS and in scientific workshops convened to address specific technical issues.

This high level of transparency was supplemented by an Annual Progress Report, which provides the public with information and data about the accomplishments of SFI program participants. An SFI National Forum -- consisting of senior industry representatives, SFI participants, landowners, loggers and the External Review Panel -- met annually from 1995 through 2002 to review progress and suggest improvements.

The impact of the SFI program on forests in North America began with the commitment of all members of AF&PA (primarily industrial forest products companies) to apply the SFIS on their private forests. Those lands, representing about 14 percent of the timberlands of the United States, produced about 36 percent of the wood products harvested in 1995 (Smith et al. 2001). In 1998, non-member private and public organizations were invited to join as SFI program licensees. By May of 2002, some 27 public and private organizations in the United States and Canada committed to the SFI program through licensing, bringing an additional 2 million ha under the SFIS.

Influencing the quality of management on forestlands that are owned by private individuals or managed in public ownership under applicable laws is a much more complex and difficult task. The SFI program addresses this mainly at the level of the primary wood processor (SFI program participants currently process an estimated 50% of U.S. solid wood products and 85% of U.S. pulp and paper). A primary processor, to meet SFIS obligations, must communicate all aspects of the SFI program requirements to its procurement staff, buyers and foresters, independent logging contractors, and forest landowners. Since most mills purchase well over half of their timber supply from private landowners over which they have no legal right to dictate land use or land management details, the task is one of communication, education, motivation, and encouragement.

The SFI program recognizes that the 10 million individual landowners who supply 59% of the nation's timber are a key audience (Smith et al. 2001). In 2000, the SFI program signed a mutual recognition agreement with the American Tree Farm System (ATF)[®] to help promote sustainable forestry on non-industrial private lands. (The ATF is the oldest sustainable forestry and certification program in the world, with over 65,000 individual landowners and some 25 million acres. (For more information regarding the ATF, visit www.treefarmssystem.org).

The SFIS requires each individual SFI participant to establish a written procurement policy, but under U.S. law, the specific content of procurement policies must be left to individual companies. A recent SFIS provision requires that all program participants must

have a verifiable auditing or monitoring system in place to evaluate the results of promoting reforestation and the use of Best Management Practices (BMPs) within their wood supply. Participants may choose individual policies that accept only timber harvested by fully trained logging contractors and require landowners to agree to meet SFI management measures as a condition for purchasing their timber. Today, 94% of wood delivered to SFI Program Participants is produced by trained loggers, up from 34% in 1995. This is one way the SFI program is working to make a difference in on-the-ground forestry practices on lands the participants do not own or control.

The SFI Standard (SFIS)

SFIS is a comprehensive system of principles, objectives, performance measures and indicators which integrate the perpetual growing and harvesting of trees with the protection of wildlife, plants, soil, water and air quality. It is based on the premise that responsible environmental behavior and sound business decisions can co-exist to the benefit of landowners, shareholders, customers, the people they serve, the environment, and future generations.

At the heart of the SFIS are the SFI Principles. Participants in the SFI program make a commitment to adhere to six basic guiding principles:

1. To practice sustainable forestry to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs by practicing a land stewardship ethic which integrates the reforestation, managing, growing, nurturing, and harvesting of trees for useful products with the conservation of soil, air and water quality, wildlife and fish habitats, and aesthetics;
2. To use in their own forests, and promote among other forest landowners, sustainable forestry practices that are economically and environmentally responsible;
3. To protect forests from wildfire, pests, diseases, and other damaging agents to maintain and improve long-term forest health and productivity;
4. To manage its forests and lands of special significance (*e.g.*, biologically, geologically, culturally, or historically significant) in a manner that takes into account their unique qualities;
5. To comply with applicable federal, state, or local forestry and related environmental laws and regulations; and
6. To continuously improve the practice of forest management and also to monitor, measure, and report participants' performance in achieving their commitment to sustainable forestry.

The SFIS then sets out 11 objectives to carry the principles into real world application by providing those who manage forests with a specific roadmap to expand the practice of sustainable forestry and to visibly improve performance. The objectives form the substance of the SFI program and promote the following:

1. Broadening the implementation of sustainable forestry by employing an array of economically, environmentally and socially sound practices in the conservation of

forests - including appropriate protection, growth, harvest and use of those forests - using the best scientific information available.

2. Insuring long-term forest productivity and conservation of forest resources through prompt reforestation, soil conservation, afforestation and other measures.
3. Protecting the water quality in streams, lakes and other water bodies.
4. Managing the quality and distribution of wildlife habitats and contributing to the conservation of biological diversity by developing and implementing stand- and landscape-level measures that promote habitat diversity and the conservation of forest plants and animals including aquatic fauna.
5. Managing the visual impact of harvesting and other forest operations.
6. Managing program participant lands of ecologic, geologic, cultural or historic in a manner that recognizes their special qualities.
7. Promoting the efficient use of forest resources.
8. Broadening the practice of sustainable forestry by cooperating with forest, wood producers, consulting foresters and program participants' employees who have responsibility in wood procurement and landowner assistance programs.
9. Publicly reporting program participants' progress in fulfilling their commitment to sustainable forestry.
10. Providing opportunities for the public and the forestry community to participate in commitment to sustainable forestry.
11. Promoting continual improvement in the practice of sustainable forestry and measure and report performance in achieving the commitment to sustainable forestry.

Each objective contains specific performance measures and core indicators to evaluate program participants' compliance with the SFIS. Compliance with the 34 performance measures and 118 core indicators is mandatory, and program participants must apply all relevant portions of the SFIS to maintain conformance. The net result is that program participants not only practice sustainable forestry on forestland they manage and own, they also promote sustainable practices on the other lands that they affect through their procurement.

Governance

The SFI program was initially designed and operated within the AF&PA organization, but market research indicated that internal management limited the program's credibility. As a result, in 2001, governance of the SFI Standard and certification procedures was shifted to a 15-member, independent Sustainable Forestry Board (SFB) composed of 1/3

conservation and environmental organizations, 1/3 professional and academic experts and 1/3 forest industry leaders. The SFB has convened an Auditor's Forum and a Customer's Forum, to help incorporate the views of these important partners into the continuous improvement of the program. In January of 2002, the SFB completed its legal separation from AF&PA, ensuring that management of the SFI Standard and Verification/Certification Procedures is now conducted by an independent non-profit organization.

In one of its initial actions, the SFB sought public review and comment of the SFI Standard. On the basis of those reviews, the SFB adopted major enhancements to the standard, including one that addresses "forest of exceptional conservation values." The new standard requires SFI participants to develop plans for the location and protection of known sites with viable occurrences of species and communities that are identified as critically imperiled or imperiled, working with NatureServe or another organization with similar expertise. (NatureServe is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing knowledge to protect the natural world, by working in partnership with The Nature Conservancy and a network of scientific experts). Additionally, this enhancement calls for SFI participants to establish procurement policies that promote conservation of biodiversity hotspots and major tropical wilderness areas outside of North America and that contribute to the elimination of illegal logging.

Progress Indicators

The first 7 years of the SFI program have been marked by continuous improvement, both in terms of the program's participation and content and in its effect on the forests operating under it. Some milestones include:

SFI Implementation Committees (SIC) at the State, multi-state, or Provincial level involve public agencies, universities, local forestry associations, loggers, landowners, and conservation groups in the development of local actions to help further SFI implementation under different regional situations. There are 37 SIC's representing 38 states in the U.S. and 4 Provinces in Canada. In 1995, SIC's raised and spent approximately one-half million U.S. dollars in their programs; today that level has increased to over US\$4.8 million per year.

Under the leadership of the SIC's, logger and forester training programs have reached over 67,400 field professionals. These people are critical to the quality of forest harvest operations, and where they are skilled and dedicated in the art of harvesting and regenerating forests in a sustainable way, their effect extends from the lands of SFI participants into all of the private and public forests where they operate.

In 1998, a voluntary verification/certification process was established, and SFI program participants could engage independent, third-party auditors to verify their conformance with the SFI Standard. The process was rapidly adopted, with some 283,000 ha going through third-party certification in the first year. As the SFIS was enhanced in 2001, certification and auditing standards compatible with International Standards Organization (ISO) procedures and protocols were adopted. Today, SFI program participants who undergo third-party certification must make a summary of the audit and findings

available to the public. Initial re-verification must occur within three years of the date of the verification and not exceed every five years thereafter. Periodic (annual) surveillance audits are required for all SFI certifications where a program participant wishes to use an SFI on-product label.

In 2002 the SFB instituted new third party auditor qualification requirements. Lead SFI program auditors must achieve the highest qualification (Environmental Management System Lead Auditor or equivalent) available under the Registrar Accreditation Board (RAB), the Canadian Environmental Auditing Association (CEAA) or equivalent.. In addition to the new lead auditor requirements, SFI third party auditors must now meet applicable training, education, and experience requirements established by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI/RAB) or equivalent.

To facilitate the involvement of public observers, a formal inconsistent practices protocol has been established at the SIC and national level. The process allows any person to question whether a practice they see in the forest, or an entire company's certification, is consistent with the SFI Standard. The procedure includes an intensive local study of the practice or certification called into question, a guarantee of due process for the questioned participant, a report on proposed action back to the complainant, and consequences for offenders that can include revocation of their SFI certification.

Sustainable forestry is about more than proper timber harvesting or prompt reforestation after harvest. It also means maintaining water quality and wildlife habitat in forests, actions that are not always easy to measure. One indicator in the 7th Annual Progress Report is the amount of land where SFI participants have entered into formal or informal agreements with a conservation or wildlife management agency or organization to develop and carry out their management plans. Over 13.8 million ha were managed under such agreements in 2001; three times as much as in 1997 when such data were first collected.

Developing Quality and Building Credibility

The primary role of the External Review Panel has been to assure that the progress data reported by the SFI program managers were accurately analyzed and presented. In the first years of the program, the concerns focused on the data analysis. The AF&PA staff developed methods of data management and analysis to assure accuracy while maintaining business confidentiality for individual firms, and the Panel spent many hours reviewing methods, results, and the interpretation of those results. When all were assured that the information in the Annual Progress Report was as accurately and honestly presented as possible, the text went to press.

As the program grew, and the data began to illustrate trends, the Panel's concern shifted to the source of those data – the reports from the SFI participants. In 1999, the External Review Panel, AF&PA, the Izaak Walton League of America, The Conservation Fund, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund cooperated to create a Forest Monitoring Project (FMP). A professional forester hosted by the Izaak Walton League and a forester from the USDA Forest Service staffed the project.

The FMP conducted over 50 field reviews in a 3-year project, evaluating how effectively practices on the land supported the annual progress reports of SFI participants. These reviews also identified and publicized exemplary problem-solving approaches at the field level. Where participants were encountering problems in documenting conformance with a particular performance measure, the FMP brought those issues back to the ERP and AF&PA for additional research and study. On the basis of the FMP results, the Panel could assure the public that the progress reported was an accurate reflection of what was taking place in the participating forests.

Today, with most of the land in the SFI program undergoing independent third-party certification, the FMP has been discontinued and the oversight of quality control in the field has shifted to the independent auditors. The SFB has initiated strict quality controls to ensure that those auditors have appropriate training and credentials. This accreditation process includes a formal field peer review of at least one SFI audit annually to maintain approval to conduct SFI certifications. An interpretations committee of forestry experts working with the SFB receives questions from both SFI program participants and auditors, providing answers and interpretations that form a growing compendium of reference information to assist field practitioners in determining how to meet the SFI Standard. Those efforts combine to provide the Panel with confidence in the integrity of the field application as well as the progress reporting.

It is still beyond our knowledge to know for certain that today's forestry practices will prove to be fully sustainable. Any sustainable forestry effort, while it can strive for the best scientific and professional knowledge available, must remain open to continual improvement and change as knowledge grows and situations change. The commitment of the SFI program to continual improvement has been evident since the program's beginning. As that commitment – and improvement – continues to unfold in the future, the SFI program provides an excellent example for others to study and follow.

Replicability

The approach of the SFI program – development of an industry standard through a multi-stakeholder process – is replicable in other countries as well as other industries. The creation of the SFB, with its model of independent, shared decision-making involving a broad cross-section of public and private stakeholders, is a pattern that can be replicated elsewhere. It took the SFI program 5 years to develop that approach to governance, but those lessons are available for the benefit of any that wish to study them.

SFI participants and staff have been pro-active in the international discussions surrounding forest certification. While an international framework of mutually-recognized sustainable forestry certification systems is yet to be achieved, there has been a great deal of progress and consensus on critical elements for the assessments of certification systems. The debates around forest certification have raised the visibility of the issue among consumers and businesses at every step of the supply chain, as well as among public officials. By further enhancing a leading and broadly accepted national

standard for sustainable forestry, the SFI program is making a major contribution to the emerging consensus on the need for sustainable forestry throughout the world.

Efforts to encourage the replication of the SFI program approach elsewhere, as the basis for an international framework of mutually equivalent forest certification systems, have resulted in publishing the SFI program materials in Chinese, French, Spanish, Japanese, German, and Korean. At the request of the Office of the Vice President of the United States, the SFI Standard was translated into Russian, so that former Vice President Gore could present it to Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomerdin as an example of non-governmental voluntary programs to improve the environment.

While this is an unfolding story, all indications are that the SFI program provides a learning ground with broad international application. If the vision of sustainable development that started at UNCED and continues to grow in a variety of international efforts can be made to work at the practical level in North America's private forests, there is hope that it can be extended to a much broader international stage in the coming Century.

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