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Renewable Resource Notes

Forest Certification for Family-owned Forests: Who will certify and why?

David Mercker, Extension Specialist, Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries

The concept of forest certification has grown as a tool to foster sustainable forest management. It began on the global scale in the 1980s, and moved rapidly to the United States. Initially in the U.S., several forest product companies completed third-party certification, followed by many publicly owned forests. Some stakeholders are beginning to discuss the need to accelerate forest certification on family-owned forests. Family-owned forests are particularly important in the U.S. because they comprise the majority of the forest land and contribute the greater part of the nation's annual timber removal. Yet little is known about who among this diverse and sizable group will adopt certification on their lands, and why.

In order to examine certification on family-owned forests, University of Tennessee Extension staff sent a survey to 1,050 landowners in three counties located in West Tennessee. Landowners with 40 or more acres of forest land were targeted for the study. The response rate was 51 percent. The results of the survey are summarized here.

Demographics ... who owns the land

The average landowner is 61 years old, has owned his or her land for 21 years and has 217 acres of forest land. Regarding occupations, 42 percent are retired, 23 percent are professional and 20 percent own their own business.

Participants were given 14 reasons for "why" they own forest land, and were then asked to rank the reasons. "Timber production" ranked sixth on the list of 14, with the top three reasons being: 1) to pass on to children or other heirs, 2) to enjoy scenery, and 3)

to supply food and habitat for wildlife. One-half of the landowners indicated that they had received forestry advice or information in the past. Table 1 summarizes the sources of forestry advice.

Table 1. Source of forestry advice or information.

Source of Advice	Percent of owners indicating they had received advice from this source
State Division of Forestry	56.6
Consulting Forester	37.2
Logger	35.1
Family or Friends	23.6
Another Landowner	17.8
Forest Industry	16.1
University/Extension	13.2

Landowner's knowledge of and interest in certification

Only 3 percent of the landowners have familiarity with forest certification. Even so, when given a definition of forest certification, 81 percent said they would consider it. The following definition was provided:

"Forest certification means that forests are managed in a sustainable manner and that trees are harvested with environmentally sound practices. These management practices are certified by objective third parties. Landowner participation is voluntary."

“Certification systems” are organizations offering verification that forests are being managed sustainably. There are four major systems in the United States: American Tree Farm, Forest Stewardship Council, Green Tag and Sustainable Forestry Initiative. Landowners in the survey have very little familiarity with any of these systems (Table 2).

Table 2. Familiarity with certification systems.

Certification System	Percent of owners with some familiarity
Green Tag (National Woodland Owners Assoc.)	1.6
Forest Stewardship Council	2.8
American Tree Farm	3.2
Sustainable Forestry Initiative	3.8

A profile of the type of landowner who will consider certifying

When asked why they would consider certifying their forest, landowners state as the most important reasons: 1) to make their forest healthier, and 2) to improve wildlife habitat. Selling timber for a higher price ranked fifth out of the six reasons provided (Table 3).

Table 3. Reasons why landowners would consider certifying their forest land.

Reason for Certifying	Overall rank
If my wood products could be sold for a higher price	5
If it gained me access to additional wood markets not normally available	6
If it saved me money by reducing the likelihood of future regulation	3
If it helped protect the environment	4
If it improved wildlife habitat	2
If it made my forest more healthy	1

Landowners who are willing to consider certification can be profiled. The study indicates these landowners are more likely to be well-educated professionals who are new to forest ownership. They are also more likely to have received advice or information about forest management in the past. When those who are willing to consider certification were asked “what they believed forest certification would accomplish,” they confirmed that certification will:

- improve forest management,
- increase profits in tree farming,
- satisfy consumers that their wood purchases are supporting good forestry,
- lessen the need for regulation,
- give recognition for the good forestry that is already being practiced, and
- be necessary for timber growers to compete in the international market.

The preference for ways to learn about certification include the passive methods of visiting a Web site and viewing a videotape at home, and the active methods of attending an on-site forestry field day, and talking with professional foresters and other landowners.

Concluding remarks

With so few forest landowners having an understanding about forest certification, the impetus for bringing it to the United States did not originate with them. Even so, certification of family-owned lands could benefit them as well as the forest industry by ensuring future competitiveness and also by giving credibility to the sound forestry practices that are already being practiced. Further, certification might build trust with an anxious non-forestry community by informing them about forestry and possibly lessening the potential for restrictive forestry legislation. Forest certification may not long endure; but it may. And if it does, we would be remiss by ignoring the accessibility for family-owned forests.

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