



A Forest Certification Scheme Designed to Deceive

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) is a forest certification scheme that was begun by a timber industry trade association and remains beholden to Big Timber. Most of us have seen the SFI label on paper or wood products. Unfortunately, it's not what it seems.

Same-old Forest Industry *greenwash*

The SFI has updated its suite of standards for the certification of forests and forest products, replacing the 2015-2019 standards with versions that go into effect in 2022. In releasing the revised standards, the SFI claims to have made major enhancements in critical areas like climate and biodiversity. Sierra Club has conducted an in-depth analysis of the changes, however, and finds that by and large they amount to the same-old forest industry greenwash.



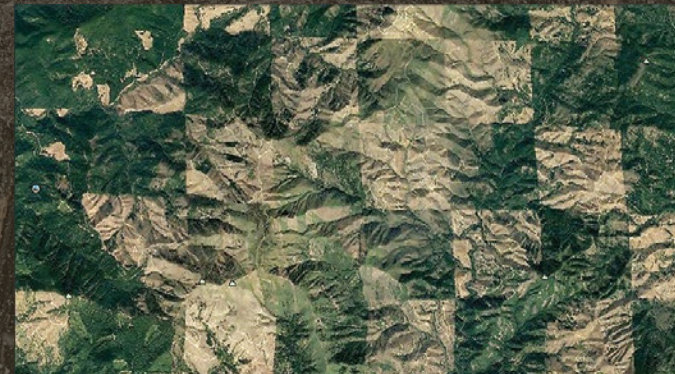
The SFI's new standards are essentially the same as the old ones. They continue to allow business-as-usual (BAU) industrial logging and pass it off as "sustainable," including landscape-level clearcutting, the replacement of rich natural forests with monoculture tree farms, and the use of harmful chemicals. They guarantee little of substance over BAU partly because they are riddled with loopholes. Instead of prescribing specific improvements in on-the-ground practices, the SFI standards often rely on "weasel words" like program and policy that enable the largest timber companies in North America to wrap themselves in a cloak of fine verbiage even as they continue to mismanage and degrade our forests.

- Instead of protecting old growth on the lands they manage, SFI certified companies must "support and participate in programs for the conservation of old-growth forests in the region of ownership or tenure."
- Instead of fully protecting imperiled species on their lands, e.g., maintaining the quantity and quality of populations and habitats, companies must develop a "program to protect" species.
- Instead of recognizing Indigenous Peoples' right to give or withhold consent for logging that affects their traditional rights and resources (known as Free Prior and Informed Consent and affirmed in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), SFI certified companies must "develop and implement a written policy acknowledging a commitment to recognize and respect" their rights.

Certified old-growth destruction in British Columbia



Certified habitat fragmentation in California



Certified violation of indigenous peoples' rights



Let's take a closer look at some areas where the SFI's boasts of "major enhancements" in their 2022 standards ring hollow:

Climate Change and Climate Smart Forestry

A meaningful definition of climate smart forestry is managing forests in ways that significantly increase carbon sequestration and storage and strengthen forests' ecological resilience in the face of change. Yet, as usual, the 2022 standards place "programs" before performance. The new climate-related sections of the SFI Forest Management Standard largely point back to its other requirements, which for the most part do not mitigate the climate impacts of intensive commercial forestry or promote alternative practices that reduce logging-related emissions and store more carbon. Instead, the Standard sanctions the same large-scale, short-rotation clearcutting that has reduced many forests' carbon stocks to a fraction of their natural levels and will keep them low so long as BAU continues. The Standard also still does not prohibit the logging of high carbon sites within certified forests, including old growth. Such logging results in substantial net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, even after accounting for regrowth. The Standard does not even require maintenance of net standing timber volume over time, as a partial proxy for carbon levels.

Biodiversity, Endangered Species, and "Forests with Exceptional Conservation Value"

The 2022 standards' bottom-line requirements for protecting and restoring biodiversity and endangered species remain highly inadequate, even for species and natural communities identified as "Forests with Exceptional Conservation Value" (FECV). Protections for FECVs and other threatened and endangered species and communities continue to be piecemeal and often discretionary, with some species and habitats likely to be overlooked. Also, requirements for a company's "program to protect" FECVs and other species are loosely defined, with no required outcomes for species' populations and habitats. The Forest Management Standard's updated expectations for landscape-level conservation also do not require meaningful outcomes in certified forests. Meanwhile, the goal of recovering imperiled species and ecosystems is essentially ignored, even in the context of public forests.



Photo credit: TJ Watt - Ancient Forest Alliance

Old Growth, Intact Forest Landscapes, and Primary Forests

The new Forest Management Standard's approach to old growth forests, Intact Forest Landscapes (IFLs), and other primary forests remains weak. Old growth can be logged in certified forests as long as companies participate in vague regional conservation programs. Meanwhile, IFLs and other primary forests remain unrecognized and unprotected. These are areas that have been largely untouched by intensive, industrial-era management, and are thus generally enormous carbon pools and biodiverse ecological refugia which can serve as benchmarks for natural and functional ecosystems. Many such areas also have important social and cultural values, including for Indigenous Peoples. Also unrecognized and unprotected are older forests that have been previously logged but can still serve as building blocks for restoring old growth in regions where it is now rare.

Indigenous Rights and Free, Prior, Informed Consent

The 2022 standards' substantive requirements for identifying and respecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples on both public and private lands remain murky, and continue to suffer from fundamental gaps, both in terms of which rights are protected and which Indigenous Peoples are considered. The standards also do not measure up to the international standard of "Free Prior Informed Consent" (FPIC), and ignore the fundamental issue of consent.

Forest Conversion

The new SFI standards still allow widespread conversion of relatively natural forests to ecologically-impooverished plantations. Such plantations may even be made up of exotic, non-native species, provided the certified companies determine that a narrow set of ecological values will persist elsewhere in the landscape and have "justified" any conversion that harms a few other values. The standards also ignore and allow unfettered forest degradation and conversion of natural forests to tree farms. They still completely fail to require or encourage managing existing plantations toward more natural conditions, including in ways that can provide both timber and important biodiversity and climate benefits. And finally, the standards continue to allow conversion of potentially large amounts of productive forestlands to other land uses, with no meaningful restrictions. Whether from a timber production or an ecological perspective, such conversion is one of the least sustainable things that can happen to a forest landscape.

Certified Sourcing? Try Certified BS!

One major problem the SFI made no pretense of addressing in the standards revision is its popular but deeply deceptive Certified Sourcing label. Most people naturally assume that there is a connection between products bearing a certification system's label and certified forests. But with the Certified Sourcing label, this isn't the case.

SFI has two types of product labels: the Certified Sourcing label and Chain of Custody labels. As is the case with other forest certification systems, products that use SFI Chain of Custody labels must have some inputs from forests certified to the Forest Management standard and/or recycled sources. However, there is no requirement for products that bear the Certified Sourcing label to incorporate any material from SFI-certified forests, a fact that is explicitly recognized in SFI's rules for label usage: "The SFI Certified Sourcing Label and claim do not make claims about certified content."

Instead, the Certified Sourcing label rests on standards that apply to non-certified forests, and because these are substantially scantier and weaker than those of the Forest Management Standard, it's no surprise that the great majority (some estimates run as high as 90%) of SFI certified products on the marketplace use it. And because the Certified Sourcing label is visually nearly identical to the Chain of Custody labels – the difference lies in the fine print whose nuances will be overlooked by many – the professional buyer and the general consumer alike can be duped into thinking they are purchasing a product linked to a certified forest when in fact they are not.

To summarize, although SFI has gone through a revision process, the outcome is still much of the same: weak standards that fail to uphold critical environmental and social values and a labeling system whose central pillar is greenwashed.

This is why Sierra Club says...



Certified Sourcing

www.sfiprogram.org





Don't buy SFI!

Instead, you can [take action](#) for forests through thoughtful consumption.



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