

WELCOME TO THE WOOD WARS

The battle to protect the planet's forests often gets bogged down in a contest between competing organisations over who is best qualified to undertake such a role. Long-time industry commentator, *Phillip Lawrence*, presents a short history of forest certification.



Phillip Lawrence

The first recorded attempt to trace wood used for production was in Europe, a French Royal decree of 1637, which stipulated that members of the guild of cabinet makers had to mark the furniture they made so that the wood used could be confirmed as being sourced from France's own forests.

Trees, wood and forestry came to our generation's attention in the 1970s with the notion that acid rain was killing forests so rapidly that some iconic forests in Europe and North America were certain to be wiped out in a short space of time. The second issue in the late 1980s was where tropical forests were being cleared extremely rapidly, mostly by fire, to plant food crops and also for cattle grazing lands. The most notable example of land clearing was in Brazil where the demand for hamburger meat in the western world meant vast tracts of land were being cleared using fire in order that cattle could graze. The rate of forest clearing reached almost unbelievable dimensions. The concept that trees, forests and wood were being used to make products was not the issue that drove the need of forestry certifications at that stage.

The first mention of forests in regard to some need to address the potential loss of forestry lands was in a G7/G8 communiqué at the 1987 Venice summit, which noted the need to halt tropical deforestation. In 1989 the Paris

summit gave its support for the Tropical Forestry Action Plan. A few years later, in 1992, the International Tropical Timber Organization was started as a group to set standards and control how tropical timber resources were being harvested and used around the world. The focus on tropical timber resources identified that timber was being harvested in many places around the world, not just in the tropics, but also in the cold northern, boreal forest areas of the world.

As a result, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) was formed in 1993 with most impetus coming from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The FSC mostly wanted to address issues that related to the impact on forestry life in the event that trees are harvested. It created a strong criterion for harvesting methodology which would greatly reduce the impact that forestry had on the land and the creatures that lived there. They gave particular attention to waterways in their list of forest management controls.

A COMMON IDENTITY

Many people, particularly those in the wood products industry, were very concerned in the early 1990s with a group dominated by environmental groups such as WWF. The controls and requirements that were put on the industry by FSC were rigorous and these controls covered forestry issues as well as social matters such as addressing bio-diversity and local populations. In response, a number of industry bodies were set up to create their own versions of a forestry certification. On June 30 1999, the Pan European Forest Certification (PEFC) organisation was formed in order to bring the many different groups that had individually set up their own 'codes of conduct' under one umbrella organisation that could present a common identity label to the buyer of timber products and also to the general public.

PEFC is not a single forestry certification like FSC; PEFC is a controlling body that investigates individual certifications or forestry codes of conduct and then determines if they are achieving a certain level of rigour. So if a forestry certification is quoting a PEFC acceptance it is considered to be a thorough forestry certification that

addresses harvesting, bio-diversity and local population issues.

As PEFC gained more acceptances, particularly in its home base of Europe, the FSC group became concerned that their rigorous standards were not being equalled by PEFC and so the market was accepting an inferior forestry standard. At almost every opportunity, FSC focused attention on attacking anyone in the market who certified their products with anything other than FSC. These actions propelled the idea that FSC was in fact just another militant NGO wanting only to stop industrial progress rather than having a real concern about protecting forestry.

RAISING THE BAR

However, another view is that the aggressive action of FSC against PEFC in particular has raised the performance of PEFC. This is because PEFC has not responded aggressively to FSC's attacks but rather inwardly reviewed its own values and standards. Many organisations that have used PEFC have been frustrated by the apparent lack of market retaliation by PEFC against FSC. However, some academic studies have noted that the competition between the two has raised the standard of overall forestry certifications.

PEFC changed its name after about five years of operation to Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification to reflect the worldwide acceptance of its work. PEFC has more area of forestry land under its certification compared to that of FSC. There have been a number of studies carried out documenting the battle that has taken place with FSC attacking the values of PEFC. For the most part, PEFC has been reluctant to engage in a public fight with FSC on which of the two certifications is the better; rather PEFC has preferred to say that both certifications could exist in the market because they are equal.

Unfortunately the inter-certification attention has diluted the original goals of forestry certification. In the first instance, back in the early 90s, the great concern everyone had was on protecting tropical forestry; the fact is that only about 4 percent of certified forestry is located in tropical regions of the world. ●

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