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'Big Green' Lobby Wants to Cut 2 of 3 Forestry Oversight Branches

[Kevin Mooney](#) / [@KevinMooneyDC](#) / August 19, 2014



The idea to certify forests worldwide grew out of the United Nations Earth Summit in 1992. (Photo: Newscom)

Pay your protection money. Do the secret handshake. And kiss the ring. Otherwise, forget having green activists attach their environmental seal of approval to the wood products harvested from your forest.

That's essentially the message organizations such as the Natural Resources Defense Council, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace will be in a position to transmit if the U.S. timber industry submits to a monopoly in forest certification, free market economists argue.

The "Big Green" lobby—mainly the organizations listed above plus the World Wildlife Fund, Rainforest Action Network and a few others—wants a relatively new player to assume monopoly control of the market.



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Today, three share the action: the [Sustainable Forest Initiative](#), seen as the closest to the forest industry of the three, the [American Tree Farm System](#) and the new guys — the [Forest Stewardship Council](#).

The concept of forest certification initially gained traction during the [1992 United Nations Earth Summit](#) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, when it was adopted as part of a “[smart growth](#)” strategy known as “[sustainable development](#).”

If the Forest Stewardship Council takes over all forest certifications, it would mean higher prices, more jobs lost, and reduced economic output, according to [a study](#) last year from George Mason University’s [EconoSTATS](#) program.

The report compared Forest Stewardship Council standards with those of the two other leading competitors. Since the Forest Stewardship Council uses two different standards—one for naturally formed forests and another for man-made plantations common in the South—the study took into account four methods.

The authors concentrated their case studies on forests in Arkansas, which accounts for about 14 percent of private forest lands in the South, and Oregon, which accounts for about 10 percent of those in the Pacific Northwest.

The study found the Forest Stewardship Council imposed far higher costs than did the Sustainable Forest Initiative or the American Tree Forest System.

In Oregon, it would result in the loss of more than 31,000 jobs and reduce annual severance taxes by more than \$6 million. In Arkansas, it would reduce forest industry employment by up to 10,000 jobs and reduce annual severance taxes by more than \$600,000.

“Part of the problem with the FSC is that it takes more property off the market so that it can’t be harvested,” Wayne Winegarden, an economist and contributing editor to EconoSTATS, said of the Forest Stewardship Council adding:

FSC is more restrictive than the other standards. This is why it’s always better to have a competitive regulatory scheme. If consumers decide that higher costs that come with the FSC are worthwhile, then that’s the direction they will go. But if not, then we have other alternative standards that can balance economic and environmental concerns.



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A multilevel, prefab green home in Santa Monica, Calif., uses recycled materials and Forest Stewardship Council cedar. (Photo: Newscom)

Discrediting Competitors

Environmentalists devised forest certification to fight forest depletion in developing countries. The process, they say, assures consumers that wood products originate in “sustainably managed” forests. The three competing certifiers apply their “independent” standards to assess whether a company’s forest-management practices are worthy of certification.

The non-binding agreement that grew out of the 1992 UN Earth Summit, known as [Agenda 21](#), promoted ecologically responsible methods of harvesting that were supposed to allow for economic development but avoid harmful levels of deforestation.

More than 31,000 jobs are at stake in Oregon and another 10,000 in Arkansas.

When the summit failed to produce any legally binding agreement on forest management, environmental groups stepped in to form a non-profit organization called the Forest Stewardship Council. The German-based organization, founded in 1993, now boasts more than [800 members](#).



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Green groups with close ties to the Forest Stewardship Council have moved aggressively to discredit its competitors, especially the Sustainable Forest Initiative. The Dogwood Alliance, for example, organized campaigns against businesses that used SFI standards, including OfficeMax, Office Depot, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Staples.

Danna Smith, Dogwood's executive director, holds a seat on the Forest Stewardship Council's 15-member board of directors.

In 2009, a non-profit group called ForestEthics increased the stakes by filing complaints against the Sustainable Forest Initiative with the Internal Revenue Service and the Federal Trade Commission. In the [FTC complaint filed last year](#), ForestEthics accused SFI of violating the agency's guidelines by "greenwashing" destructive forest practices.

Winegarden, who co-wrote the foreword to the EconoSTATS report, said:

The criticism of SFI is that it is too close to industry, and it is fine to make that argument. But the environmental groups that favor the FSC certification standard are closely tied in with the FSC and many are members. This is why it's best not to have a monopoly in one direction or another. Let them compete with one another.

Despite pressure from environmentalists, the U.S. Forest Service [has declined to endorse](#) the standards of the Forest Stewardship Council over those of the Sustainable Forest Initiative and the American Tree Farm System.

What Consumers Demand

Corey Brinkema, president of the Forest Stewardship Council, told The Daily Signal that George Mason University's EconoSTATS study is "deeply flawed."

The FSCI, Brinkema said, is "a voluntary approach that is designed to use the market as a way to help forests, wildlife and the people who depend on them for their livelihoods."

He said interest groups that typically oppose government regulation now call on government to regulate green construction:

Consumers are demanding higher levels of environmental and social performance from business, and leading companies are responding.

FSC has another issue. It implements 38 standards around the world, many of them "interim" and not fully developed. U.S. timber companies would face far more stringent requirements than those of Brazil, Russia and other nations.

Weingarden said this creates an incentive for U.S. customers to shop for timber abroad, where lower environmental standards mean lower costs:

The consumer who cares about the environment doesn't know they are getting an inferior product from say, Russia, that also contributes to environmental degradation.



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Ideally, suppliers should have the opportunity to substitute the Sustainable Forest Initiative's standards, or those of the American Tree Farm System.

But the EconoSTATS study warns environmental groups are trying to get into a position where they can block access to green markets by green building certification program such as LEED, which stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.



An FSC-branded comb. (Photo: Forest Stewardship Council Facebook via Olivia Harmon)

Making the Connection

The Sierra Club, Greenpeace and the Earth Island Institute formed a joint initiative in April called [Greenwash Action](#) to promote LEED standards for building energy efficiency and to attack Green Globes, which offers an alternative assessment program.

The [U.S. Green Building Council](#), a non-profit based in Washington, D.C., developed the rating system used by LEED as a way to advance “sustainability” in building projects.



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The Green Building Council [counts](#) more than 4,000 LEED-certified government buildings and another 8,000 registered projects. LEED has been accused of offering green points in exchange for accommodating design adjustments that do little to protect the environment. Builders can secure LEED approval “through simple purchasing decisions” that “sidestep labor-intensive options,” a report in [USA Today](#) said.

Green activists are connected to LEED as well as to the Forest Stewardship Council.

For starters, Greenwash Action Executive Director Jason Grant [is identified](#) as an accredited LEED professional. His company, Jason Grant Consulting, [promotes](#) Forest Stewardship Council products in the green building market, according to the Green Building Council.

Another well-connected figure is Denis Hayes, CEO of the [Bullitt Foundation](#) and chairman of Earth Day Network.

“Greenwashing is a major impediment to environmental progress on climate, forests, toxics and many other problem areas,” Hayes has [said](#). “I have been tracking Greenwash Action since its conception, and I believe this is the right initiative at the right time.”

The Bullitt Foundation has made grants to the Forest Stewardship Council since 1993, Hayes [said](#) in media interviews.

So far, though, the Forest Service hasn’t given a nod to the standards of the Forest Stewardship Council and brushed off those of the Sustainable Forest Initiative and the American Tree Farm System.

Urging Awareness

Timothy H. Lee, senior vice president of legal and public affairs at the [Center for Individual Freedom](#), hopes it stays that way.

Lee told The Daily Signal that Greenwash Action has demonstrated a “willingness to misinform environmental stakeholders and the general public” in pursuit of an “extremist agenda.”

Greenwash Action may present itself as a disinterested party, he said, but the facts show the organization is an advocate for LEED and a monopoly for Forest Stewardship Council wood products.

He said Grant, executive director of Greenwash Action, “has made a living providing consulting services for businesses attempting to get FSC and LEED certification.”

The participation of other building certification programs would mean “more competition for certified wood, and in turn a smaller market share for FSC timber and LEED projects,” Lee said:





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That would obviously run contrary to the interest of his clients, so it's unsurprising to witness him promoting the mission of Greenwash Action.

Other board members of Greenwash Action hold, or have held, official positions with LEED and the Green Building Council, Lee said, and that does not inspire confidence:

Greenwash Action's supporters spread misleading information about sustainable forestry practices, work to block competition in building markets and have direct financial ties to the causes they support. But the more people become aware of these facts, the better

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