

SENT TO LSU AGCENTER/LOUISIANA FOREST PRODUCTS DEVELOPMENT CENTER - FOREST SECTOR / FORESTY PRODUCTS INTEREST GROUP



Battle in the Woods: Who Can Say When Timber is 'Green'?

Elizabeth Harball, E&E reporter

ClimateWire: Thursday, September 25, 2014

MONTREAL QC -- There's a lot going on behind those little green, tree-shaped logos you sometimes see on paper cups, notepads or even lumber used to build houses.

Forest certification labels are intended to show buyers that wood-based products come from healthy, well-managed forests -- forests where biodiversity and watersheds are protected, and that can help store a significant chunk of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

But convincing some environmentalists that its label is truly "green" has proved troublesome for North America's largest forest certification group, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. It now sets standards for about 250 million acres of treed land in the U.S. and Canada.

At the organization's annual conference held last week in Montreal, SFI's leaders expressed hope that upcoming revisions to their standard and their recent recognition by a major European green building group could placate at least some of their skeptics.

SFI's leaders repeatedly took to the podium to extol their label's independence and credibility. Because wood-based products are held to SFI's standards, they said, industry giants like International Paper Co., Plum Creek Timber Co. and Weyerhaeuser Co. are protecting forests, not degrading or destroying them.

"Third-party, independent certification -- especially SFI -- has had a profound effect on the way forests are managed across America," Larry Selzer, chairman of SFI's board of directors and president of the environmental nonprofit Conservation Fund, said in a speech. "Forests are healthier and more productive than they have ever been." Who certifies the certifiers?

But for over a decade, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative has waged an intense information war with green groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council and Greenpeace, which frequently emphasize SFI's origins from within an industry group, the American Forest and Paper Association.

The rubber hits the road in the logging business in the state of Washington. Which logs are "green"? Photo by John Lloyd, courtesy of Flickr.



26 September 2014



SENT TO LSU AGCENTER/LOUISIANA FOREST PRODUCTS DEVELOPMENT CENTER - FOREST SECTOR / FORESTY PRODUCTS INTEREST GROUP

SFI is now independent of the association, but the environmentalists allege its certification still caves to the interests of big timber suppliers or pulp-and-paper companies. Judging by some of the SFI conference's biggest sponsors, Resolute Forest Products, Plum Creek Timber, Weyerhaeuser and Georgia-Pacific, as well as the many representatives from these companies at the conference, it is clear that SFI remains in the good graces of the commercial sector.

Most environmental groups that criticize SFI support a competing certification standard developed by the Forest Stewardship Council, which is more global in scope and counts Greenpeace among its founding members.

"SFI was created to really cheat consumers and cut corners," said Jim Ace, a senior campaigner for ForestEthics, a pro-FSC environmental group that is among SFI's most vociferous opponents. "We want to see a rigorous standard that really protects forests and wildlife, and that's just not what SFI is."

In an attempt to subdue ForestEthics' steady stream of attacks, SFI sent the group a cease-and-desist letter last year. The environmental group was undeterred; months later, it filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission saying SFI deceives consumers by claiming its certified products are "green" (ClimateWire, June 13, 2013).

In stark contrast to ForestEthics' message, industry representatives at SFI's conference said they saw no dramatic difference between SFI and FSC. Conference speaker James Griffiths, who formerly directed the Forest Solutions Group of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, agreed.

Griffiths, now an independent sustainability consultant, allowed that in SFI's early days it was closely aligned with the timber and pulp-and-paper industries. But now, he said, the organization has become "much more broad-based," allowing groups like Ducks Unlimited Canada on its board. Meanwhile, he added, FSC has attempted to become friendlier to business interests.

Asked about the environmental community's campaigns against SFI, Griffiths said, "There's always going to be critics, but the market will decide."

© 1996-2014 E&E Publishing, LLC

Content Provider: E&E Publishing, LLC

Richard P. Vlosky, Ph.D.
Director Louisiana Forest Products Development Center
Crosby Land & Resources Endowed Professor of Forest Sector Business Development
Room 227, School of Renewable Natural Resources
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
Phone (office): (225) 578-4527
Fax: (225) 578-4251
Mobile Phone: (225) 223-1931

