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Every link in the chain: Effective forestry management

‘A chain is only as strong as its weakest link’. This old adage is true to the forest industry in Australia and around the world, especially today as consumers and professionals, such as architects and builders, are becoming better informed and more concerned about the environmental source of the goods they buy.

As a result, best practice forestry management is increasing in importance, including Chain of Custody (CoC) certification, says Kayt Watts, the CEO of Australian Forestry Standards Limited (AFSL).

“CoC certification labelling is the only way to trace a product back to its raw source,” says Ms Watts. “Without standards, everything else is self-declaration and provides the end consumer with no proof on whether illegal materials were bought into the mix. Consumer confidence is then undermined and support for authoritative and accurate statements on forestry management reduced or nullified.”

“Forests are only the first link in the CoC,” says Ms Watts. “Sustainable and responsible forestry management involves every step taken to produce wood and wood products, whether that be building material, office paper, toilet paper, packaging, furniture or other consumer goods. It covers the range of factors involved in the environmental impact of materials including how they are produced, processed, manufactured, transported, distributed and transformed. CoC requires that every link be certified.”

As a result, says Ms Watts, all reputable certification is good—for the environment and for business.

For the environment, wood through forests and its bi-products, is naturally better and helps combat climate change. Trees absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, for example, and store it so efficiently that about half the dry weight of a tree is carbon. This carbon remains locked in the wood even when it is used for building products or furniture. Also, the production of wood products uses less energy (usually from finite fossil fuels) compared with some other building materials.

For business, certification provides a competitive edge—important given that Australia exports 2.4 billion tonnes of wood products annually to countries increasingly demanding wood from sustainably managed forests, not from illegal logging or suspect trading. And certification helps meet the increasing demand consumers and professionals are placing on suppliers for products from responsibly managed sources, including those imported. Worldwide, for example, architects and building professionals are re-evaluating wood as a renewable and versatile building material and a preferred environmental choice.

CoC certification is only required by those who transform, re-label or re-package a product. Organisations often find the process of completing certification has other benefits, including improved internal business systems and operations and staff confidence.

“Sustainability and climate change are in the public arena these days and are often a hot media topic,” says Ms Watts. “CoC certification is one way an organisation can be held accountable for the origin of the wood it produces or uses. Staff in the wood and wood product industries can be questioned about their industry outside of work. Those employed by certified organisations find it easier to speak confidently about their organisation’s commitments and awareness of the impact of illegal logging and suspect trading of products.”

“Through Chain of Custody certification we can, as a society, be confident that the raw source comes from forests managed in a sustainable, best practice manner,” says Ms Watts.

To date, Australia has more than 7.9 million hectares of certified forests and 50 certified CoC organisations. “There is much more to be done,” says Ms Watts. “To ensure supply, 3.5 million more hectares of native forests and plantations still need to be certified, plus approximately five per cent of the 38 million hectares of private forest estates in Australia,” says Ms Watts. “In the end, we would like all wood and wood products to be managed through the CoC, nationally and internationally.”

About AFSL and the AFCS

Australian Forestry Standard Limited is a Standards Development Organisation and a not-for-profit public company registered in July 2003. The company owns the standard development functions and manages the elements of the AFCS. The scheme will:

- provide Australian and overseas consumers with an independent, internationally recognised third-party certification scheme for forest management in Australia
- promote a culture of 'continuous improvement' of the sustainable forest management practices in Australia
- support a market for forest products that are a result of sustainable forest management practices and value adding processes that maintain the integrity of the source forest certification and promote the broader environmental benefits of using wood-based products.

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