

Credit where accreditation is due

*There is a substantial gap between forestry accreditation schemes, writes **Geoff Gorrie**.*

Increasing numbers of discerning consumers, and growing awareness of the need to question the environmental credentials of products such as timber and paper, have resulted in the development of two major international schemes for forest certification.

These schemes are designed to provide criteria and requirements for forest managers to demonstrate that they have implemented sustainable forest management so that their operations can become certified as legal and sustainable, and reduce the sale of illegally sourced wood products in the market.

However, a gap has appeared between the robustness and transparency of the two competing schemes that is causing problems in reducing the impact of illegal logging worldwide. The schemes include the world's leading scheme, the Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC), which certifies almost 200 million hectares of forests globally, and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which certifies more than 80 million hectares worldwide. Both schemes have been made available to Australian forest managers and owners.

Australia's forest industry, together with the Australian and state and territory governments, developed a forest certification scheme for Australian forests, known as the Australian Forest Certification Scheme (AFCS). Recognised internationally as part of the PEFC, the AFCS has certified about 8.5 million hectares of Australian native forests and plantations in public and private forests.

The AFCS now certifies the government forestry operations in NSW, Tasmania, South Australia, and Queensland. The Victorian Government's forest manager, VicForests, is in the process of finalising its AFCS certification and it is hoped that Western Australia's forests will soon become certified under the AFCS.

A relative newcomer to the Australian forest industry, the Forest Stewardship Council has certified about 500,000 hectares of plantation forests.

The standards for forest management are quite different. The Australian Forestry Standard has been developed by Australians for Australian conditions, and is recognised by Standards Australia. The FSC uses two interim regional standards provided by international certification bodies and is yet to develop a standard specifically for Australia as a whole.

Internationally, the PEFC scheme (which includes the AFCS) is, judging by the size of the area it has certified, the preferred scheme. This may be because the FSC has been criticised for its lack of independence of the basic functions in its processes for setting standards and assessing conformance with them.

Each element of the certification process (standard setting, certification and accreditation) should be independent and transparent, as it is within the PEFC scheme. However, FSC manages all of these functions and thus compromises the credibility and objectivity of the certification standard.

PEFC is not an accreditation body. It uses independent third-parts' certification bodies that are accredited by national accreditation bodies, which are subject to peer review. Forests are then certified by these certification bodies according to

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the certification standard of the national certification schemes, allowing provision of the PEFC and AFS logo.

JAS-ANZ is the independent accreditation body for the AFCS. It is the recognised national accreditation system of Australia and New Zealand and is a member of the International Accreditation Forum, which provides the peer review.

Perhaps the root of FSC's inability to keep up with the PEFC is its framework for sustainable forest management, which was developed by the FSC membership. Thus, standards invariably reflect the values of the FSC membership, which is dominated by environmental non-government organisations such as WWF, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace.

Its smaller size means less FSC wood is available. FSC Australia's Michael Spencer has recently lauded some Australian companies for starting to label products as FSC certified. Due to the lack of forests certified through FSC in Australia, the FSC has developed a mixed sources policy that requires paper products to contain just 10 per cent FSC-certified materials.

In contrast, the PEFC and AFS logo can only be used if the sum of contents of PEFC and AFCS-certified material, which is verified by a chain of custody certification, exceeds the minimum threshold of 70 per cent. Having 70 per cent or more of your product from PEFC and AFCS-certified material demonstrates a more credible position for a company on sustainable management than just 10 per cent.

Spencer also lauds the FSC in Britain but the PEFC and AFCS schemes are fully accepted by the British Government in terms of legality and sustainability for its public timber procurement.

There is room for two major forest certification networks in the world. FSC should get on the job with the intent of forest certification; ensuring that more forests are certified as legally and sustainably managed. This is just what the PEFC and the AFCS are doing.

Arguments in recent opinion pieces by the chief executive of FSC's Australian branch have criticised the Australian Government, while avoiding more detailed issues of accountability of its own certification schemes. If you want to look at FSC certification related issues, go to www.fsc-watch.org.

FSC Australia has focused on gaining the endorsement of groups such as the Green Building Council of Australia and the WWF, instead of providing a robust standard of forest management that includes checks and balances by independent national bodies.

The FSC is in danger of becoming focused on promoting a commercial brand name rather than providing a mechanism that provides buyers of forest products the option of buying materials that satisfy strict environmental guidelines. The FSC should let its reputation and stringency do the talking and return to the original intent of forest certification, which is to reduce illegal logging and unsustainable forestry practices and acknowledge responsible and sustainable forest management.

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