

Forest certification in South Africa

BACKGROUND

There has been much interest in the sustainable management of natural resources since the publication in 1980 of the World Conservation Strategy. This is reflected in the number of intergovernmental, international non-governmental and country-level initiatives to address sustainable resource issues. From a forestry perspective, the most significant was the international acceptance of the Forest Principles – a non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests – encompassed in the Agenda 21 document that resulted from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. At that time, Agenda 21 stood as a blueprint for action to be taken globally into the twenty-first century by governments, development agencies, non-governmental organisations and independent-sector groups.

Against this background emerged the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) which has striven to balance commercial forestry interests with forest ecology and the well being of local people.

The FSC is an international non-government body that has been set up to oversee a credible process of independent certification of well-managed forests. It combines internationally compatible and locally appropriate standards for forests, a label for the products and a chain-of-custody link between the two.

In South Africa, there are 22 certificates issued for plantation forests and one certificate issued for a semi-natural forest. The total area certified to the FSC standard in South Africa totals 1 426 362ha. This constitutes over 80% of forest plantation land (planted forests and associated non-planted areas) in the country. Given these impressive statistics, it has been viewed as something of an enigma that South Africa has no locally developed FSC standards. While the absence of such standards does not preclude the certification of forests in that country, it does mean that accredited certification bodies (independent organisations which have been accredited by the FSC to undertake third party certification audits) must interpret the international principles and criteria for the local conditions. Ideally though differences and difficulties of interpretation in the international principles and criteria should be addressed in national and local forest stewardship standards, and must be used in conjunction with national and international laws and regulations.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT STANDARDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The National Forest Act 84 of 1998 allows for the development of a set of criteria, indicators and standards for sustainable forest management, based on a set of principles contained within the act. The objective is to use the PCI & S to monitor progress towards sustainable forest management and to set regulatory standards for forestry. In 2002, The Institute of Natural Resources completed the development of a set of CI & S that could be used for:

- Assessing changes and trends in forest conditions and management systems
- Evaluating the degree to which the forest sector contributes to the nation's economic, environmental and social aspirations
- A set of objective standards for the management of forests
- A tool for assessing and improving forest management practices in forest management units.

It is important to note that the CI & S were not developed for certification purposes.

Following on FSC Board meeting with stakeholders in March 2004 at Sabie, South Africa, the stage was set for the development of CI & S that could be used for forest certification in South Africa. As is the nature of any such initiative where there are no funds, initially, to drive the process, and few people willing to give of their time in the absence of such funds, progress was slow.

A number of informal meetings were held with government and volunteers and, eventually an interim group of people identified criteria for qualification of interested and affected parties for membership of a Working Group. The working group was to be made up of three members each of social, environmental and economic representatives and three members from government. Working Group members were selected following an invitation to stakeholders to participate and are made up of representatives of government, WWF-South Africa, Mondi Wetlands Project, Working-for-Water, SA Wildlife Management Association, large forest plantation growers, small grower group, the University of KwaZulu-Natal and University of Stellenbosch.

The first formal meeting of the group which took place endorsed the process followed so far, and agreed that the Working Group Chairperson would continue to drive the process. To date, an expression of

interest has been circulated to preferred service providers to develop forest certification standards and a final choice for the appointment of a service provider to undertake the work has been made. Funds for some of the initiative have been generously provided by Dfid, but significant additional funding is still being sought.

The service providers have been tasked to develop standards that must:

- be aligned with the draft Principles, Criteria, Indicators and Standards for Sustainable Forest Management of Natural Forests and Plantations in South Africa, prepared for the Committee for Sustainable Forest Management and DWAF
- comply with existing applicable legislation
- take into account existing best practice documents
- take into consideration any certification body forest management standard check lists for South Africa
- include indicators and criteria that are cost-effective and efficient
- be compatible with local ecological, social and economic circumstances
- be designed for forest management practices, not forest types
- be in full compliance with the FSC Principles and Criteria

The National Initiative Working Group, because of its support and partnership with DWAF, should not be seen to be supporting any one particular certification process. The National Forest Act allows the Minister to promote or create certification programmes to encourage sustainable forest management. In this regard, the South African National Initiative to establish certification standards for plantation and natural forests will ensure that the FSC requirements for accreditation of the certification process are met, without actually being termed an FSC National Initiative.

Because of the extensive consultative process followed for the development of CI & S under the National Forest Act, the Working Group is hoping for a relatively smooth and quick process, without losing the stakeholders support that a credible process must meet.

THE FSC PLANTATION REVIEW PROCESS

The FSC's forest management standards are based on 10 Principles and Criteria for responsible forest management. At its 10th anniversary celebration in September 2004 in Bonn, Germany, the FSC launched a comprehensive review of its policies and standards for plantations. This is largely because an extensive list of issues concerning plantation forestry has been raised by a diverse array of stakeholder groups. The FSC Plantations Review started its

work at the beginning of 2005 and has as its objectives:

- to engage social, environmental and economic stakeholders in an international review of the implementation of the FSC Principles and Criteria for plantations, and to provide clear guidance for their future implementation, with broad support of the FSC membership
- to provide for the benefit of the global community, clear, authoritative and widely accepted social and environmental standards for responsible plantation management.

A FSC Board endorsed Policy Working Group has been appointed to identify, debate and resolve the underlying policy issues (the first phase), while the second phase will develop technical solutions to meet the policy requirements previously identified. The Policy Working Group is made up of two representatives each from the north and south economic, environment and social chambers. These twelve people come from 11 countries and the process is facilitated by an independent facilitator. South Africa is one of the representatives from the economic south chamber.

As in any policy review and development process, much emphasis is placed on not only the issues that are identified, but how to put these into unambiguous policy requirements. The PWG has identified a number of issues that will need to be resolved through appropriate policy statements. These include:

- maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem functions
- promotion of positive local development
- workers conditions, especially contractors
- use of pesticides (including herbicides)
- conversion of native vegetation to plantations
- maintaining water quantity and quality.

The PWG is visiting South Africa in early April to get a chance to "reality check" the proposed amendments to the P & Cs that they will subsequently be revisiting as part of the review process. Also on the agenda is the question of whether Plantation Principle 10 is actually needed if, as is currently the case, plantation forests need to meet all criteria contained in the other nine Principles. There is the thought that perhaps there should be a separate set of P & C for forest plantations, or even another organization, against which this category of forest would be assessed for certification purposes. These thoughts are still under discussion, but are compounded by a fundamental problem as seen from a global perspective viz. how does one define a plantation. While this is a very simple answer in South Africa, it is not so clear in other parts of the world. For example, at what point in a managed natural forest does the forest become a plantation, given that management can include selective felling and planting of selected trees?

The PWG has thus tended to focus on the intensity

of management practices as a means to avoid the somewhat academic debate around the definition of a plantation. It has thus been put forward by some members that the intensity of management and its associated economic, environmental and social impacts, both positive and negative, are issues that can be addressed through the policy review process. In this regard is, of course, the somewhat controversial criterion contained in Criterion 10.9 which states that plantations established in areas converted from natural forests after November 1994 normally shall not qualify for certification, although there is a provision that if the manager/owner can demonstrate no direct responsibility for this conversion, certification may be allowed.

The PWG is currently discussing the issue of ecosystem conversion to plantations rather than just natural forests. Should this be adopted, vigorous debate will undoubtedly result over the continued inclusion of Criterion 10.9. There is a strong argument in favour of permitting *all* plantations, of whatever vintage, to qualify for certification, provided they meet certain standards. And one of these standards could be the need for a credible third party impact assessment process that has the support of interested and affected parties. Provided the potential impact of a proposed forest plantation has been adequately assessed in the planning stage, and mitigating measures put in place, there should be no reason why the forest plantation could not qualify to be assessed for certification purposes. This would also be in accordance with one of the Forest Principles adopted under Agenda 21, that “states have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental policies” Furthermore, given the fact that the increasing demand for fibre will place greater demands on the world’s forest resources, which can be met through conversion of ecosystems

to plantations, any efforts to disqualify certain conversions could be construed as barriers to trade in forest products.

CONCLUSION

The development of forest certification standards in South Africa and the revision of the FSC Plantation Principle have prompted calls from some quarters to put the national Initiative on hold until the FSC has completed its revision process. While there may be some merit in this view, there is also the view that having the two processes running in tandem allows for “reality-checking” the policy revision process with the development of certification standards. All too often, policy is developed and, in rolling out the policy, practitioners may be faced with the unintended consequences of such policies. It is therefore hoped that the development of our own standards will be helpful to deal with the practical implications of any policy revisions. South Africa is, perhaps, in the fortunate position of having their FSC Contact Person driving the national Initiative, as well as serving on the Policy Working Group.

The outcome for South African plantation forestry hinges, to some extent, on the successful outcome of the Plantation Review Process. While this outcome is dependent on the resolution of certain policy issues, we are confident that the revision process can only benefit responsible plantation establishment and management, provided appropriate and credible standards are met or exceeded.

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