



Forest Carbon and Climate Program  
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# State Forest Certification

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## Introduction

Forest certification evaluates forest quality and management against agreed-upon standards. Certification can interact with forests and markets via mechanisms in forest monitoring, timber tracking, and labeling of forest products (WWF, n.d.). These systems are in place to assure manufacturers, consumers, governments, and other interested parties that the products they use meet certain management benchmarks deemed socially, economically, and/or environmentally responsible. Certification criteria can include maintaining forest ecosystem health and vitality, protecting socioeconomic conditions, and monitoring and assessing implementation.

Many different actors certify their forestland, including private landowners, commercial forest companies, and public U.S. state governments. State governments certify forests on public lands to demonstrate a commitment to sustainable management, either through voluntarily action or legally binding statutory requirements.

This paper will, first, provide an overview of the main certification programs in the U.S. and discuss the four types of certification; second, examine certification program dispersion across states, as well as adjacent policy and carbon implications.

## Certification Programs

In the U.S., there are three major certification programs: the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), and American Tree Farm System (ATFS). Table 1 describes each program.

*Table 1. U.S. Forest Certification Programs*

Program	Description
FSC	In 1993, FSC was founded out of a concern for deforestation in tropical forests (Ecoenclose, 2019). The group sought to work with regional and national leaders to establish ecological standards for timber operations worldwide. Today, FSC operates in more than 80 countries. (FSC, n.d.-a)
SFI	Developed by the American Forest and Paper Association (AF&PA), SFI was seen as an industry response to the creation of FSC (Ecoenclose, 2019). Since 1994, the program has operated in the U.S. and Canada by providing certification for large landowners. In 2007, SFI separated from AF&PA.
ATFS	ATFS was formed in 1941 and has been managed by several different organizations (Forest History Society, n.d.). Currently, the American Forest Foundation (AFF) oversees the program. ATFS primarily certifies private landowners, although state agencies and other natural resource organizations can also certify through ATFS.

## Types of Certification

The four types of certification are forest management certification, chain of custody (CoC) certification, group certification, and fiber sourcing standards (Chizmar et al., 2020). Table 2 details the types of certification available from FSC, SFI, and ATFS.

Table 2. Types of Certification

Program	Forest Management Certification	CoC Certification	Group Certification	Fiber Sourcing Standards
FSC	X	X	X	
SFI	X	X	X	X
ATFS	X		X	

### Forest Management Certification

Forest management certification establishes standards that must be conformed to when managing forested land. These criteria are most applicable to state governments, who certify their lands by pledging to adhere to certain principles of sustainable management. All the major certification programs have principles, criteria, and/or standards relating to forest management.

The FSC U.S. Forest Management Standard (v1.0) governs the majority of requirements landowners must meet under FSC certification (FSC, n.d.-b). This document outlines ten key principles, as well as 57 criteria that serve to judge whether or not a principle has been fulfilled (FSC, n.d.-c). Principles include compliance with national and regional laws, respect for the rights of Indigenous Peoples, and ensuring economic viability along with a wide range of environmental and social benefits (FSC, n.d.-c). FSC has been revising its standard since 2018, and is expected to published an updated version in late 2022 (FSC, n.d.-d).

With SFI, any organization seeking forest certification must adhere to the SFI 2022 Forest Management Standard (SFI, n.d.-a). This standard includes 13 principles, 17 objectives, 41 performance measures, and 141 indicators to guide the implementation of management practices and to gauge success. Examples of SFI objectives include fire resilience and awareness, legal and regulatory compliance, and respect for Indigenous Peoples (SFI, 2022-a).

Landowners and natural resource professionals with land certified through ATFS are required to follow the 2021 Standards of Sustainability, a document approved by AFF which outlines sustainability principles, measures, and indicators ensuring implementation of sustainable management (AFF, 2021). A core performance metric is the provision and implementation of a written forest management plan, consistent with the “size of the forest and the scale and intensity of planned activities” (AFF, 2021).

### Chain of Custody Certification

CoC certification demonstrates to customers that wood products originate from well-managed forests, recycled materials, or other certified sources. Key to the functioning of CoC systems is the ability to trace the production of individual products, ensuring that they are both sustainable and approved (DNV, n.d.).

FSC and SFI offer CoC certification, while ATFS landowners are able to certify their harvested wood under SFI or the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) (AFF, n.d.). A key difference between FSC and SFI is FSC's more stringent definition of unwanted sources of wood and wood fiber. However both programs require public reporting of audits (FSC, 2012).

FSC and SFI both have product labels, which indicate products that have been sourced from certified, sustainable forests or other controlled materials. FSC offers three labels, including FSC 100%, FSC Recycled, and FSC Mix (FSC, n.d.-e). Meanwhile, SFI has labels indicating certified forests, certified sourcing, and recycled materials (SFI, 2022-b).

## Group Certification

As a means to lower the costs associated with certification programs, group certification options allow several individual owners to combine their forestland under one certified holding. The person generally shares common linkages to the landowners whose certification they manage, such as proximity, family, or consultancy ties. Certification standards and requirements are the same as those for individual landowners.

FSC group certification applies to both forest management and CoC certification, while SFI group certification is meant for fiber sourcing standards (FSC, n.d.-f) (SFI, n.d.-b). SFI's Small Lands Group certification module was developed in cooperation with ATFS, and is available to small landowners not enrolled in ATFS's own Independently Managed Group (IMG) standard (SFI, n.d.-b).

## Fiber Sourcing Standards

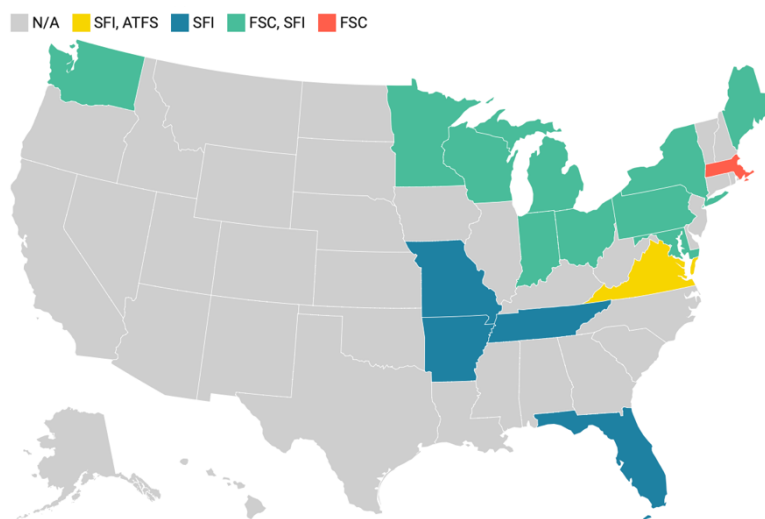
Fiber sourcing standards ensure raw material in the supply chain comes from "legal and responsible sources", regardless of whether the land is certified or not (Chizmar et al., 2020). Unlike CoC certification, which is for wood producers that own forestland, fiber sourcing standards are for producers that do not own or manage land themselves. Rather than forest owners, wood-consuming mills certify to demonstrate responsible procurement. As of this writing, SFI is the only certification program to offer fiber sourcing standards. (SFI, n.d.-c)

## State Certification

As noted above, state agencies with the responsibility of managing and/or regulating forests (e.g., Michigan Department of Natural Resources) can certify public lands according to forest management standards. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows which states have public forest land certified by FSC, SFI, or ATFS. Importantly, several states have land certified with more than one program (e.g., FSC and SFI, SFI and ATFS).

While most states are not required to certify forest management to a third-party standard, some states have explicit statutory requirements to do so. In Michigan, Part 525 of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act (NREPA) states that the DNR must "seek and maintain third-party

Figure 1. State Forest Certification



certification” and “satisfy the sustainable forestry standards of at least one credible... certification program” (Michigan Legislature, 1994).

## Policy Implications

Due to a lack of rigorous and independent research, there is limited understanding as to whether forest certification systems are effective in promoting sustainable practices, especially regarding the participation of state governments.

In a systematic literature review on the topic (Wolff and Schweinle, 2022), the effectiveness of forest certification was found to vary based on geography and the target variable (e.g., deforestation, forest degradation, and economic viability) considered. Table 3 outlines the impact of certification in North America, along with the number of studies identifying subsequent results.

*Table 3. Certification Impacts in North America*

Target Variable	Impact
Deforestation	Neutral (n=1)
Forest Degradation	Positive (n=2), neutral (n=2)
Economic Viability	Mixed (n=5), negative (n=2), positive (n=1)

This literature review confirms the need for further research. Without more information, it is possible that states could mis-prioritize third party certification over other policy mechanisms such as the regulation of management activities, alterations to the property tax code, or implementation of monitoring and enforcement of best management practices.

## Forest Health and Climate Change Mitigation

Within the context of climate change mitigation, the health and productivity of a forest ecosystem will directly influence its ability to sequester and store carbon in a sustainable manner, as well as its ability to maintain those stocks over the long term. Sustainable forest management actions that promote healthy, productive forests can also improve the ability of forests to adapt to changing climatic and environmental conditions by increasing their resilience to stressors and disturbances (Janowiak et al., 2014) (Swanston et al., 2016). Some of these complementary actions include controlling invasive species, enhancing plant diversity, and thinning to reduce the density of overstocked stands lowering risks of mortality and carbon loss due to wildfire, pests, or disease.

## Conclusion

Forest certification evaluates forest management against agreed-upon standards between a landowner and third party. There are four main types of forest certification: forest management certification, chain of custody (CoC) certification, group certification, and fiber sourcing standards. State governments certify public forestland through forest management certification programs offered by FSC, SFI, and ATFS. With the policy implications of state forest certification largely unknown, more research is necessary to ensure state governments are pursuing sustainable forest policies.

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