Certification systems and the *Forest Practices Code*

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Forest certification schemes are becoming increasingly prominent in forest management. They provide assurance to processors, retailers and consumers that the timber from which wood products are made has been grown and harvested in a sustainable way. In an ideal world, they also provide a market advantage to the forest grower.

There are currently two forest management certification schemes available to wood producers in Australia. The Australian Forestry Standard (AFS) is endorsed by the international Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), another international organisation, also offers a forest certification scheme in Australia.

The *Forest Practices Code* is the core element of the forest practices system in Tasmania. As such, it is inevitably cited by forest managers trying to demonstrate good practice, and by concerned stakeholders questioning the adequacy of its requirements to meet certification requirements.

So, how well do the *Forest Practices Code* and the certification systems work together?

At first glance, there might appear to be some incompatibility between the two. The *Forest Practices Code*, and by extension the forest practices system, is based on a co-regulatory approach, combining self-management by the industry and independent monitoring and enforcement by the FPA. The mentality of certification systems is all about external verification. In practice, the Tasmanian *Forest Practices Code* provides a really useful framework to demonstrate at least partial compliance with many of the requirements of both the AFS and the FSC systems.

Each certification system is based a set of core values, called "Criteria" by the AFS standard and "Principles" by the FSC. The diagram on the next page demonstrates how the *Forest Practices Code* supports the various elements of each system. There are undoubtedly other creative ways to demonstrate how the code is relevant to one or both of the standards.

Is compliance with the *Forest Practices Code* enough to get certified?

No, not by a long shot. Merely referencing your compliance with a particular section of the code is not enough to demonstrate compliance for certification; we as forest managers actually have to do some additional things. What the code does is provide a foundation for demonstrating achievement against particular certification requirements. Unlike the code, the AFS and FSC require demonstration of extensive and accurate planning, monitoring and record keeping and a capacity for continuous improvement.

For example, if an auditor were to enquire about how an organisation's operations protect soil resources, and a forest manager replied, 'I just comply with section C2 of the code', no auditor would accept that answer. However, being able to produce documentation from contractors or supervisors showing that operations have been shut down when conditions warrant, records of the reasons for those shutdowns, notes about the subsequent assessment of the situation and notes on completion of any restoration works required, will take you a long way down the track towards satisfying a certification requirement regarding soil protection.

In what ways does the *Forest Practices Code* support certification systems especially well (or not)?

The big focus of both certification systems is sustainability. Although the code was written before sustainability became a buzzword, it does address the concept throughout, with half a dozen direct references and countless applications. The code also deals with soil and water extremely well, safeguarding these values in virtually every section. Another example would be Section E on reforestation, which provides clear guidelines to ensure that sites are adequately regenerated, a clear requirement of both certification systems.

On the other hand, a big focus of forest certification standards is the ability to demonstrate that you have management systems in place, e.g. the ability to Plan, Do, Check and Review. Although the code provides you with any number of opportunities to document compliance, it does not actually demand that you create and maintain a business management system. And while the code touches on the need to be a good neighbour and consult with affected parties and local government, it does not stress these requirements as heavily as either of the certification standards. However, the protection of domestic and town water supplies is a good example of how the code takes into account the social impacts of forestry operations.

Has certification altered the importance of the *Forest Practices Code?*

Absolutely not. Compliance with legal and regulatory requirements is a key component of both certification systems. Furthermore, the code provides the fundamental foundation for many elements of company forest management systems. It remains the primary mechanism in Tasmania for ensuring forest, land and cultural heritage values are protected for both certified and uncertified forest managers.

Critics may claim that because simple compliance with the code is not enough, it shouldn't be relied upon during assessments for certification. So we have a paradoxical situation where organisations seeking certification may try to distance themselves from the code and the forest practices system, and to minimise their perceived reliance upon it. This is a bit unfortunate, because the code is an enormously useful support mechanism for those seeking certification, when used in conjunction with well-structured management systems and genuine stakeholder engagement.

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AFS criteria
Forest management shall...

4.1 . . . be undertaken in a systematic manner that addresses the range of forest values

FPC: A3.1, A3.2

4.2 . . . provide for public participation and foster on-going relationships to be a good neighbour

FPC: A3.2, C1.2, E2, E4, F3

4.3 . . . protect and maintain the biological diversity of forests, including their seral stages, across the regional landscape

FPC: B1, B3.1, B3.2, B3.4, B4, B6, B8, C1.1, C4.1, D, D2.1, D2.2, D3, D3.1, D3.2, E, E1.3, E3.1

4.4 . . . maintain the productive capacity of forests

FPC: C1.5, C3.1, E1, E1.3, E1.4

4.5 . . . maintain forest ecosystem health and vitality

FPC: B3.1, B6, D3, E4

4.6 . . . protect soil and water resources

FPC: B1, B2, B3.1-3.4, B4, B5, B6, B7, C1, C2, C3, C4, C6, D1, D2, D6, E1.2, E2. F1

4.7 . . . maintain forests' contribution to carbon cycles

4.8 . . . protect and maintain, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, their cultural, social, recreational, religious and spiritual heritage values

FPC: B7, D4, D5

4.9 . . . maintain and enhance long-term social and economic benefits

FPC: A3.2, B7, B8, C4.4, D2.2, D4, E3.1, E4, F

FSC principles
(abbreviated).

#1. Forest management shall respect all applicable laws . . . international treaties and agreements . . . and comply with all FSC Principles and Criteria

FPC: A1, A3.1, A3.2, C1.2, D, D5, E1.5, E2

#2. Long-term tenure and use rights to the land and forest resources shall be clearly defined, documented, and legally established

FPC: A3.2, D5

#3. The legal and customary rights of indigenous peoples to own, use and manage their lands . . . and resources shall be recognised and respected

FPC: D5

#4. Forest management operations shall maintain or enhance the long-term social and economic well-being of forest workers and local communities

FPC: A3.2, B7, B8, C1.2, C4.4, D2.2, D4, E2, E3.1. E4. F3F

#5. . . . encourage the efficient use of the forest's multiple products and services to ensure economic viability and . . . environmental and social benefits

FPC: C1.5, C3.1

#6. . . . conserve biological diversity . . . water resources, soils, unique and fragile ecosystems and landscapes . . . maintain ecological functions of

FPC: B1, B2, B3.1-3.4, B4, B5, B6, B7, B8, C1, C2, C3, C4, C6, D1, D2, D3, D6, E1, E2, E4

#7. A Management Plan . . . shall be written and kept up to date. Long term objectives of management, and means of achieving them shall be

FPC: A3.1, A3.2

#8. Monitoring shall be conducted . . . to assess condition of the forest, yields of forest products, chain of custody . . . social and environmental

FPC: E1.4, E1.5

#9 . . . activities in high conservation value forests … maintain or enhance the attributes which define such forests. Always . . . precautionary approach

FPC: A3.2, B1, B3.1, B3.4, B6, B8, C1.3, D, D2.1, D2.2, D3, D3.1, D3.2, D5, D5.1, D5.2, D6.1, D6.2, E3.1, E3.3

#10. Plantations . . . should complement . . . reduce pressures on, and promote restoration and conservation of natural forests

FPC: C4.2, D4.3, E1.2.2

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There is also a widespread perception that certification requirements require you to go above and beyond what is legally required. In reality, what you need to do is meet the standard against which you are being evaluated. In places like Tasmania with a robust forest practices system, your approach to compliance with the code, and your ability to demonstrate that approach to stakeholders and auditors, may well be enough for you to meet certain aspects of a standard.

As forest managers, certification requires us to demonstrate the effectiveness of our internal business systems to the world. They need to be technically sound enough for an auditor to review and endorse, and written in clear enough language for stakeholders to be able to understand. Certification demands that we are transparent in what we do, but it also give us an opportunity to communicate to the world what we do, how well we do it, and how well the forest practices system underpins our operations.

In a sense, forest management today can be likened to the traditional 'layering' approach used when going to work in the bush in Tasmania. After you put on your thermal underwear (the code and forest practices system), you put on your work clothes and boots (your corporate forest management systems). As lightweight wet weather gear is available, you may as well throw it on for extra protection (certification). And nowadays, you carry a mobile phone (communication) and hope for good reception wherever you are.

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