



## So You Think You Want to Get Certified? Choosing an SFM Standard

**IN ANY DISCUSSION REGARDING SUSTAINABLE** forest management (SFM) certification it is important to remember that all certifications are voluntary. All organizations must first decide if they want and/or need to get certified in the first place. As the world's awareness of evolving environmental issues and conditions has grown over time, forest products organizations have needed to provide customers some assurance that their activities were sustainable and not just the product of senseless greed.

In BC, that assurance is provided in part by the rigorous and extensive regulatory environment we function in and, in part, by the SFM certifications we achieve. In this context, most large tenure holders in BC maintain some registration under one or another of the three major SFM brands. In essence SFM certification has become somewhat of an industry standard that helps keep one in the game.

Just like different brands of toothpaste all deliver clean teeth, all three SFM standards do a reasonable job in delivering improved forest management and forest practices in the achievement of sustainable forest management. All three standards are consistent with accepted international criteria developed through processes like the Montreal Process. They just do it differently and most of these differences find their roots in their origins. And just like different toothpastes, all three have their strengths and their weaknesses.

What are the practical considerations an organization goes through in choosing what brand of SFM certification it will register under?

### **Nature of Tenure**

For an organization, a key factor in choosing a brand of SFM is, in my view, the nature of its tenure.

The CSA Z809 standard is Canada's national SFM standard and as such reflects the public nature of the ownership of forests here. Its requirement for a public input process is unique and by far the strongest and most comprehensive. It also recognizes the overall

strong regulatory environment in Canada and respects provincial differences by allowing for a range of performance targets.

The SFI standard being a standard developed in and for the USA, is better aligned with private ownership which is by far the main tenure south of the border. Its objectives and indicators allow flexibility in approach in a way that recognizes the protected nature of property rights in the US. After all, nobody likes to be told how to do things on their private property!

For its part, the basic FSC standard was originally designed to help address the deforestation issue in the southern hemisphere. As such its criteria and indicators tend to provide direct guidance to fill the gaps in the absence of a solid regulatory environment. Unfortunately, in a regulated environment like that of BC, this often leads to duplication of efforts and costly additional processes where regulatory ones exist.

### **Location of Forest**

Another key influence on the choice of a certification brand is the location of an organization's forests. This is not such a critical factor for the CSA Z809 or the SFI standards as they have been designed to apply to whole jurisdictions. However, the FSC standard has been designed to apply to forest regions instead.

Although FSC's regional take could be a point in favour of its standard, it has led to uneven applications of the standard. For example, the application of RONV (Range Of Natural Variability) found in the BC FSC standard is not one that is found in other regional or national versions of the FSC standard. Similarly, why the FSC Boreal standard in Canada should greatly vary from that of Russia or of Scandinavian countries is not clear to me.

Taking these facts into consideration, an organization primarily working in coastal BC and managing an important component of old-growth forest could find its own sustainability

in question with a FSC certification under the BC standard that is designed to minimize old-growth harvesting. For that reason, it would likely not choose that brand.

### **Client Base**

Another crucial element of an organization's decision is the makeup of its business and its client base. When a smaller company's main customer is pressuring it for FSC certified fibre for whatever reasons, that company will naturally find itself leaning towards that standard. On the other hand, a larger company with more resources and a wider range of products and broader customer base will tend to take a more balanced view of certifications and may choose to register its various forests under any or all the SFM brands.

### **Cost**

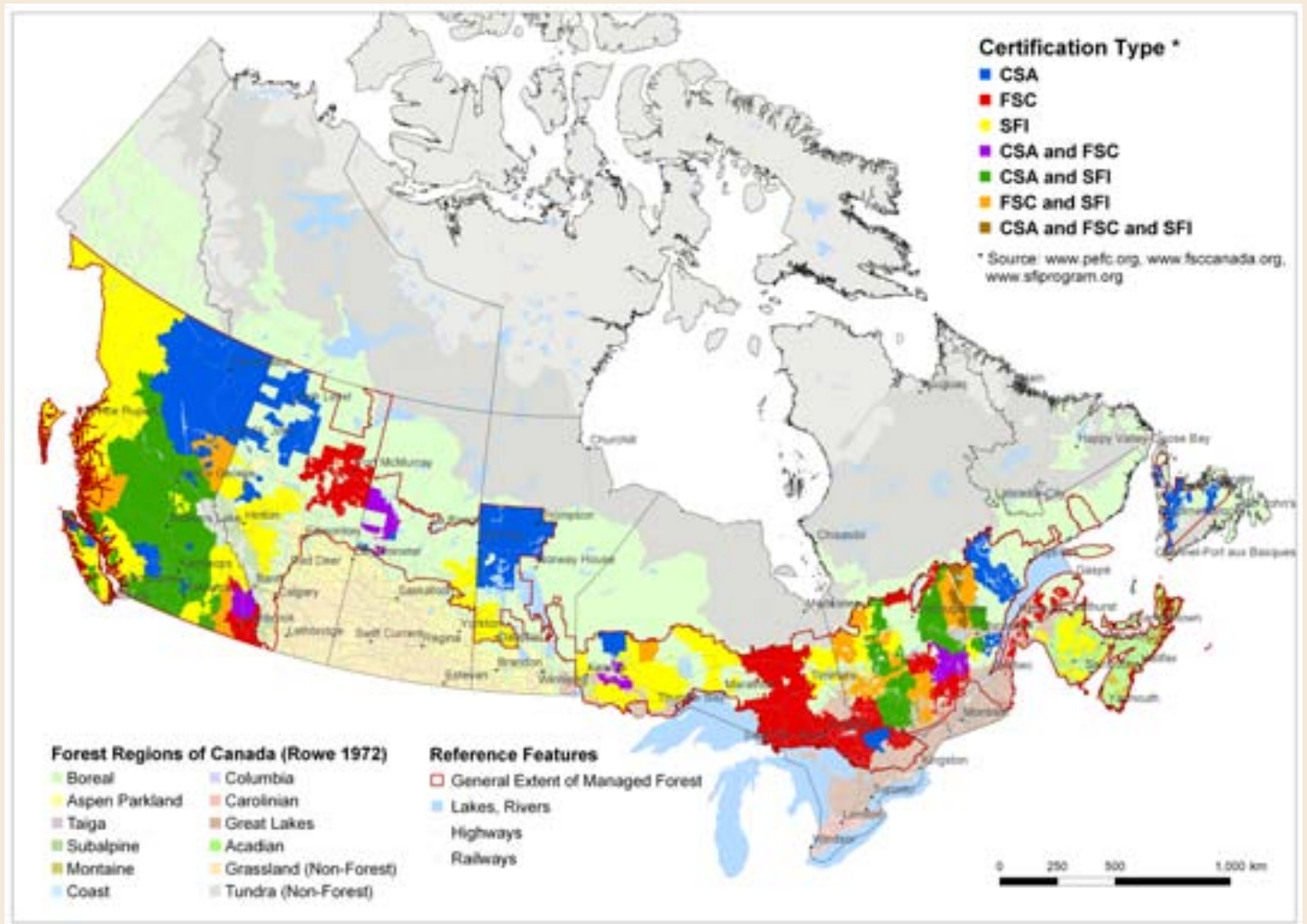
The cost factor is also a key consideration. It is costly to first achieve any SFM certification and to maintain it over time.

CSA and FSC have fairly high up-front costs. For CSA, the cost of setting up a public advisory group (PAG) and developing with it an initial sustainable forest management plan (SFMP) can be quite substantial. For FSC it is the unique processes such as RONV, risk analysis and integrated riparian assessments that create high costs.

For SFI, up front costs are often minimized because most companies have many established internal programs or processes that can be relied on to meet the standard's requirements. However, if such pieces are not in existence in an organization, its up front costs could also be substantial.

The cost of third-party audits also is significant at this set-up stage and other stages. It is highest for a FSC registration primarily because of the complexity of its audit methodology. For CSA and SFI, third-party audit costs are quite similar for both standards.

At the maintenance stage, CSA incurs the steady cost of maintaining a PAG engaged on a



continual basis. These additional costs are not astronomical and bring their own rewards in the form of long-lasting relationship with a wide array of community members. As previously mentioned, the extra costs for FSC tend to be associated with the maintenance of additional and sometimes redundant processes.

Finally, the cost of fees and memberships is the least with CSA and is substantial for SFI and FSC. The main reason is that FSC and SFI are single-purpose organizations supported by those fees and memberships. Meanwhile, for CSA, the Z809 standard is only one of thousands of standards that it oversees.

This fact is Z809's weak spot in that there is almost no resource brought to bear in the defence and promotion of the Z809 standard. A group called the CSA SFM User Group was created in an attempt to fill that gap. Membership in this group is voluntary

and brings about additional fees when an organization chooses to join it.

### Price Premiums

In the early days of SFM certification, many organizations had the vision of securing markets or price premiums for their products once they achieved certification. That has not materialized in any significant measure. Premiums have tended to be limited to small niche or specialty markets and often for limited times.

For the great majority of customers, price continues to be the main deciding factor. Once they are sure the supplier is reputable, customers will choose the certified products over the non-certified one only if there is no price difference or if the difference is immaterial. You and I do the same in all our shopping.

So in the end, an organization will choose the SFM certification brand that best fits its overall circumstances and context for mostly basic and practical reasons. 🐾

Note: The opinions and ramblings within this article are all mine and mine alone. They in no way reflect those of my past, present or future employers. Given the politics around forest certification, this is unfortunately a point that must be made.

*Michel de Bellefeuille, RPF, is certification forester at Western Forest Products in Nanaimo. Michel has worked with the three main SFM standards over the past 13 years in a variety of capacities. He was instrumental in his employer obtaining the first registration in Canada to the CSA Z809 standard, back in 1999. Over the years, he helped get forests certified to the SFI standard and dabbled with the FSC standard as well. Currently, he helps maintain registrations under both the CSA Z809 and the FSC BC standards.*