



An Evolution: Forest Stewardship Council® Certification and Tembec

WHEN FOREST CERTIFICATION DEVELOPED AS A CONCEPT IN THE MID-1990S, it was difficult to imagine that labelling forest products would become a mainstream phenomenon some 20 years later. But today the FSC® trademark can be found on an array of products from printed materials, to lumber, plywood, furniture and a personal favourite—maple syrup.

Nearly twenty years ago, the conversation focused on figuring out the role certification could play in improving forest management and trying to increase transparency in how forests are managed. We were trying to refresh our ‘social license to operate’—a concept drifting out of the temperate rainforests of British Columbia in the late 1990s.

At the time, debates and conflict about forestry practices and land use were characterized by two dominant questions—where to harvest and how to harvest. Regulatory regimes were already in place and voluntary third-party certification efforts were mainstream. Tembec, along with many other companies, was putting ISO 14001 registration in place to systematize environmental management programs.

However, even with these measures in place, questions of on-the-ground performance persisted amongst environmental groups and stakeholders. First Nations sought tools for constructive, pragmatic partnerships with forest companies. Companies were looking to differentiate themselves in an economic climate of consolidation and big box commerce. We wondered if FSC certification could be a tool—outside of the regulatory space—for innovation, dialogue and engagement where divergent interests could find some satisfaction.

It was in this context in 2001, that Tembec made a commitment to the development, testing and implementation of FSC forest certification standards on company-managed public forest tenures across Canada. The next step was to get engaged directly through active participation in the FSC organization itself. Tembec joined FSC International as a member and engaged in FSC nationally in Canada and France and in regional initiatives in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec.

As a voluntary, membership-driven, not-for-profit NGO, a significant benefit of the FSC system flows from the breadth of its members. With members as diverse as Kimberly Clark, Triton Logging, Greenpeace, National Aboriginal Forestry Association and Wildsight, the FSC is a forum to engage with other members, whether it be spirited debate on international issues such as forest carbon, fibre sourcing and certification of small forests or closer-to-home issues such as identification of high conservation value forests and First Nation partnerships.

Within this diverse membership, FSC standards have evolved over time. Implementation of them is not for the faint of heart. In essence, auditors are checking on three things:

- Past corrective action requests (CARs),
- Compliance of current practice, and
- Inquires and concerns from First Nations and other interested and affected parties.

It is a robust ‘circle check’ process giving the certified operation a solid third-party view of operational performance, internal management system integrity, quality of external relations and insight into emerging issues. As with the certification audit, annual audit summaries are publicly available providing significant transparency into the management of the certified organization and building brand value for organizations attentive to corporate social responsibility requirements.

Evolution of the FSC organization and its systems continue today. FSC conformity assessment bodies (audit firms) are themselves subject to routine audits. Auditors gain expertise in applying complex standards such as the BC FSC Standard and have a natural inclination to apply upward pressure on the bar of continuous improvement. Challenges in FSC implementation occur at both a strategic and operational level.

A particular challenging evolution is developed through Principle Three: Indigenous Peoples Rights. The key to addressing Principle Three requirements is to avoid forest managers’ natural inclination to analyze the text of the standard and develop an ‘in-house’ implementation plan. Rather they must seek direct engagement and dialogue with interested First Nations to explore how they see the standard applying in their specific context. Solutions lie somewhere in the space bounded by the recognition that First Nations “are not just another stakeholder” and companies “are not the government.” This creates an opportunity for organizations to use the FSC standard as a framework to develop constructive, mutually beneficially partnerships.

Tembec has found that implementation of FSC certification, like safety or quality programs, requires a deep buy-in from top to bottom in an organization. Professional foresters, biologists, technicians, contractors and office staff play critical roles in achieving on the ground results. They are also needed to creatively identifying pragmatic, cost-effective means to meet performance requirements and to address what can be burdensome FSC monitoring and reporting requirements.

Finally, commitment to FSC means commitment to continual evolution. The FSC is dynamic and changes to strengthen and align the system internationally are underway. A current process of revision of the principles and criteria is nearing completion. A revision to Canada’s suite of FSC standards will follow, likely in late 2012. 🐾

Chris McDonell, RPF, is manager of Aboriginal and environmental relations at Tembec, a large diversified Canadian forest products company. Based in the North Bay, Ontario and Temiscaming, Quebec at Tembec’s corporate office, he is accountable for Aboriginal relations, pursuit and maintenance of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification for all company forests and mills, company wood fibre procurement policy and implementation of partnerships with environmental organizations.

Chris Stagg (RPF) is a Registered Professional Forester employed by Tembec, a large diversified Canadian forest products company, in the role of Chief Forester for their operations in British Columbia. Chris is based out of Cranbrook, B.C.