

The Timberwatch Coalition
South Africa

A proposal to address the inadequacy of FSC plantation certification

Background

On Thursday 9th September we will be meeting to attend to the matter of widespread dissatisfaction with the system of certifying industrial timber plantations currently in use by the FSC. This meeting has come about in response to numerous complaints from a wide spectrum of stakeholders, both external and from FSC membership.

The nature of these complaints varies from issues of procedure, to lack of appropriate expertise in certification agencies, to total rejection of the use of the FSC forest certification system to certify industrial plantations.

One school of thought is that FSC certification of forest wood products or plantation wood products, has the effect of stimulating overall demand, and thus increasing pressure on the resource. In the case of plantations, this demand translates into plantations expanding into natural grassland or forest areas or into valuable agricultural lands. The bulk of the complaints against FSC certification of industrial timber plantations have come from countries where rapid plantation expansion is an issue: Brazil, Ecuador, Thailand and South Africa among others.

There is a strong lobby within FSC membership that believes a review of FSC principal 10 should be able to address the many concerns and complaints that have been voiced in recent years. Another group that includes both member and non-member stakeholders believes that the FSC system, while wholly appropriate for the certification of forests, cannot be successfully adapted to be used in the certification of industrial timber plantations. This belief is based on the fact that timber or other industrial plantations such as oil palm or rubber are intrinsically different from forests, and in most cases are directly in conflict with original forest growth or other natural vegetation types including grasslands and heath. It is also clear that large-scale plantations are socially disruptive and destroy local economies.

Timberwatch has actively opposed FSC certification of industrial timber plantations in South Africa on these grounds, and has produced ample evidence to illustrate how unsuited the FSC system is to the certification of plantations. Up till now it has appeared that the submissions by Timberwatch have not been taken seriously, and

it is therefore hoped that our participation at the plantations review meeting will not be a waste of time and money.

The main issue - Plantations are not forests

FSC needs to understand and accept that industrial timber plantations are fundamentally incompatible with forests. In order to be able to grasp this reality, attention needs to be given to how plantations are defined. There have been many attempts to produce a simple set of definitions that clearly describe forests and plantations. Unfortunately these attempts, such as that of FAO, have failed to capture the essential differences.

Timberwatch has prepared a draft set of comparative tables that we believe can be a more reliable reference to identifying the distinguishing characteristics of plantations and forests.(see attachment) The false notion that any assemblage of trees can be described as a forest should be condemned to the dust-bin of history.

Other Issues

Having established a clear understanding of the differences between plantations and forests, it becomes necessary to obtain a better understanding of the market forces that drive increasing consumption of both forest and plantation products. How much of that consumption is truly necessary ? How does that consumption impact on or benefit the people whose forests or land produce the wood that feeds the global paper and packaging industry ?

In the South African context at least, although it probably applies to most countries where industrial timber plantations are being expanded, there is a serious problem with the schemes whereby timber companies encourage rural communities to convert their farmland to industrial timber plantations. This practice leads to a situation where people are displaced to other areas in search of a means to subsist. The long growing cycle of timber plantations means that the production of food cannot take place in that area for at least 20 years. It amounts to little less than industrial colonisation of the only asset rural people possess.

It is acknowledged that in South Africa there is a need for plantation products, and that woodlot plantations can play a role in distracting pressure from our scarce forests.

This does not mean that overconsumption of wood products (over 300kg per person per annum in affluent northern countries), should be allowed to appropriate land and water resources needed for food production, and undermine the livelihoods and traditions of rural people in the south.

Some interesting South African statistics:

Two tons of fossil fuel (mainly coal) are required to produce a ton of newsprint.

Average employment in eucalyptus timber plantations is 5 people per 100ha.

The way forward

Timberwatch does not believe that a revision of the clauses of FSC principle 10 will serve any meaningful purpose. Very few if any of the existing FSC certified plantations

in South Africa actually qualify for certification in terms of the conditions specified in principle 10. It appears that the certification granted to date has been made possible only by allowing corrective actions to be deferred indefinitely, or ignored, or by simply disregarding the requirements of principle 10. The only thing that a revision of principle 10 could achieve is to accommodate existing wrongfully certificated plantations by removing the conditions that they do not comply with. This would obviously benefit the timber plantation industry in South Africa, but further deprive local people and the environment.

Timberwatch believes that there is a definite need for a system to ensure that industrial timber plantations are established, grown and cropped to the highest ecological, social and economic standards possible. A unique certification system that could be applied globally to industrial plantations, could provide substantial benefits to all sectors, providing the rules are applied fairly and there is proper independent monitoring of the system, unlike the way in which agencies of FSC like SGS have operated in the past.

Timberwatch therefore proposes:

- 1) That the existing FSC certified plantations, including the mis-named 'mixed forests' be phased out of the system as their certifications expire.
- 2) That a separate certifying organisation, possibly linked to FSC, be established and that a plantation specific set of criteria and standards be developed by that organisation through a comprehensive open process of stakeholder participation.
- 3) That FSC plays a supportive and mentoring role in the open process to establish a plantation specific set of criteria and standards.
- 4) That the new certifying organisation be named appropriately. One suggestion could be: The Plantation Standards Council.
- 5) That the new certifying organisation avoid the practise of using certifying agencies such as SGS, and rather directly employ appropriately qualified staff to conduct assessments and certifications.
- 6) That independent international auditors be engaged to audit and to monitor the certification of plantations by the new certifying organisation.

Conclusion

To rescue its credibility, the Forest Stewardship Council must start to live up to its name.

Plantations are NOT forests

Wally Menne