

## **Forest Certification: A Primer**

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*This article is an excerpt from the full-length publication: [To Certify or Not? An Important Question for Virginia's Family Forest Owners](http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/ANR/ANR-50/ANR-50_PDF.pdf), which can be found here: [http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/ANR/ANR-50/ANR-50\\_PDF.pdf](http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/ANR/ANR-50/ANR-50_PDF.pdf).*

Family woodland owners ask themselves many questions about their properties, such as if and when to cut timber, what types of wildlife to manage for, how to control exotic invasive species, and how to protect water quality. An increasingly common question that forest owners ask is whether they should certify their forests.

Forest certification programs inform consumers about the management of a forest. They recognize forests grown and harvested in a sustainable manner. In addition, they may provide marketplace recognition of wood products made, at least in part, from trees grown in certified forests and processed in a sustainable manner. Programs are voluntary and allow forest management to be evaluated and validated against a set of standards. Standards provide general guidance for holistic forest management practices and product sourcing.

### **Benefits of forest certification may include:**

1. Increased access to markets
2. Acknowledgement of good forest management
3. Potential for better forest management

### **Costs associated with forest certification may include:**

1. Acquiring a written management plan
2. Adopting current forest management practices
3. Auditing/monitoring fees
4. Continual improvement of forest management practices

There are three main certification systems in Virginia. Each system has its own standards, but they all address timber and non-timber forest values; maintenance of forest productivity and biodiversity; protection of soil and water; and aesthetic, recreational, cultural, and wildlife benefits.

The three major certification systems in Virginia are the American Tree Farm System (ATFS), the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI). While similar in many aspects, there are some key differences among the systems. An individual landowner's management goals and land base will help determine which system, if any, is best for their land.

## **How to Certify**

Landowners should research the available programs or talk with a forestry professional to help decide whether certification makes sense and which system might be the best fit for their property. More information on each of the certification programs can be found on the program web sites:

- American Tree Farm System: <http://www.treefarmssystem.org>
- Forest Stewardship Council: <http://fscus.org> or <http://www.fsc.org/smallholders>
- Sustainable Forestry Initiative: <http://www.sfiprogram.org/>

Additional, non-biased information on certification can be obtained from Dovetail Partners, Inc., the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, and the Sustainable Forests Partnership.

An early step in any certification program is to obtain a written forest management plan. In Virginia, landowners can contact the Virginia Department of Forestry to get started with this process. The forester writing the plan should be made aware of intentions to certify, to ensure the proper components are addressed in the plan.

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