

## **Certification 101: Frequently Asked Questions (published in March 2014 issue of the *Montana Family Forest News*)**

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Since 1941, the American Tree Farm System has promoted sustainable management on family forest lands throughout the United States. Tree Farm's national office and state chapters offer landowners the tools they need to practice good forest management, technical advice to support their decisions, and networking opportunities to strengthen their collective voice as caretakers of one of America's most important resources. In 2004, Tree Farm expanded its mission beyond recognition and support to offer affordable forest certification to family forest owners in the US. This article addresses some of the most frequently asked questions related to certification.

### **What is forest certification?**

Broadly speaking, forest certification is a guarantee that land management practices meet a certain standard of sustainability. A written certificate is issued by an independent third party verifying that the lands under that certification are being managed in a way that protects social, economic, and environmental benefits over the long-term. As part of the American Tree Farm System, your lands are endorsed as certified by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification Systems (PEFC). Endorsement by PEFC guarantees purchasers of wood and paper products that they are supporting sustainable forest management. Worldwide, PEFC endorses 25 forest certification systems covering 200 million hectares of forest land. As such, it is the world's largest forest certification system.

### **How is this certification different from the portfolio of services Tree Farm offered before?**

Prior to 2004, Tree Farmers were only "certified" in the sense that they were recognized as members of an organization which promoted good stewardship on private forest land. Now, Tree Farmers are "third-party certified." This means that the Tree Farm program participates in a review cycle during which its 8 Standards of Sustainability<sup>i</sup> are assessed by an outside, accredited certification body.

### **How do certification assessments work?**

At least every 3 years, a sample of Montana Tree Farms receives a visit from their inspector, a member of the state steering committee, and an independent assessor. Assessors spend a couple of hours with each Tree Farmer, walking his or her property and reviewing the property's management plans to verify that plans and management activities are consistent with the Standards of Sustainability. When the statewide review is complete, the assessor prepares a report summarizing results of the state's program as whole, without identifying individual Tree Farms. So far, Montana's Tree Farm program has exceeded assessors' expectations in meeting the standards of sustainability necessary for third party certification.

### **What are the benefits of third-party forest certification?**

Certain wood products markets deal exclusively or partially in certified fiber. Ecosystem services markets, such as carbon-banking or conservation easement programs, may require third-party certification. Certification under the Tree Farm System allows landowners access to certified wood and forest benefits markets.

### **I heard that Tree Farm is trying to establish a fee for membership. Why is should I have to pay for a program that's been free for the past 70 years?**

The American Tree Farm System receives financial support from a number of private and public sources, including donations from its members. At the state level, however, the majority of its day-

to-day operations are run by volunteer committees, part-time paid administrators, or a combination of the two. A growing membership base, combined with the demands of meeting third-party certification requirements, strains the current structure beyond its capacity. The cost of maintaining an internationally certified program – including assessments, record keeping, and administration – costs, on average, \$25 per member nationwide. Current funding sources are not adequate to pay these costs over the long-term.

### **I hear that states can opt out of being certified at some point in the future. How will this work?**

After soliciting and receiving significant feedback from its membership, ATFS is offering its 44 member states 3 pathways for future engagement. By December 31, 2015, each state must choose one of the following options:

- 1) **Certification:** Under this framework, state programs will maintain their certified status through a regional certificate held centrally by the American Forest Foundation. Beginning in 2019, states will contribute \$10 per Certified Tree Farmer annually to help offset the costs of certification, with a cap of \$7,000 per state. This contribution will help offset the costs of maintaining third-party certification. State programs will receive financial support from ATFS during the years that they undergo assessment.
- 2) **Independently Managed Groups (IMGs):** Under this model, a sponsor organization would hold an umbrella certificate on behalf of a group of landowners wishing to be certified. The Tree Farmers certified under the IMG are held to the same ATFS Standards of Sustainability but the IMG operates independently of American Forest Foundation regional certificates. Costs of operating an IMG include annual audit expenses and administrative fees and will be shared by IMG members.
- 3) **Recognition:** Under this framework, state programs would no longer be certified. Members would receive certain benefits of recognition, including assistance crafting stewardship plans, initial certification and re-certification visits from qualified inspectors, and Tree Farm signs. States would still be required to meet annual benchmarks for maintaining a quality program.

### **Who is going to decide which pathway Montana will take?**

The Montana Tree Farm steering committee is dedicated to providing its membership with the preparation necessary to make an informed collective decision about which of the 3 options is most appropriate. In the next year, we will prepare and distribute a fact sheet explaining in further detail the costs and benefits associated with each pathway. In 2015, we will solicit your feedback, likely via phone or mail survey, and ask for a vote on which option is right for Montana. In the meantime, do not hesitate to contact your state committee for further information.

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<sup>i</sup> See <https://www.treefarmssystem.org/standards-for-tree-farm-certification> for more information on Tree Farm's Standards of Sustainability.