

GUIDE ENVIRONMENTAL

News – July, 2015

Dear colleagues,

In this newsletter, you can find: highlights of my recent projects, accomplishments, and appointments; thoughts on the role of certification globally (and the state of forest supply chain risk in North America); and a brief reminder about services I offer in other sectors.

Best regards,

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Recent News and Accomplishments:

During the last few quarters, I have had the honor to have:

- Been appointed to a Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) working group on intact forest landscapes and other high conservation value forests.
- Completed a global stakeholder mapping and outreach project for a leading sustainable agriculture certification system.
- Advised a leading green building program on natural resource certification issues and solutions.
- Secured NGO participation in a business/NGO collaborative effort on life cycle assessment (LCA).
- Been appointed to the Non-GMO Project's Standards Committee.
- Testified before the Oregon Board of Forestry on protections for water and imperiled fish.
- Authored a successful motion at the 2014 FSC General Assembly.
- Completed the development of the FSC's International Generic Indicators (IGIs), as a core member of the FSC IGI working group. The IGIs provide the model for updating FSC Standards globally, and will improve the consistency of FSC certification. They should also be useful when comparing the FSC to other forest certification systems.
- Conducted a detailed analysis of another forest certification system's revised standards.

My Services – The Pony's Other Tricks:

You likely know me as an expert on forestry and certification, and someone who can bridge the NGO and sustainable business worlds. I'm proud to count this among my core skills and service areas. But did you also know I have a background in public policy development/advocacy, corporate sustainability policy, and other pertinent topics including climate, land use, and endangered species policy, plus a personal background in agriculture? For details, see my [website's](#) services-offered and about-me pages.

Food for Thought – The Role of Certification Globally (and the State of Forest Supply Chain Risk in North America):

A dialogue between the TFT and Greenpeace over the value of forest certification recently aired on the pages of Mongabay.com. It echoed some points I heard during a stakeholder project I conducted for a sustainable agriculture program. There are also important points they didn't make. Their statements ([TFT](#), [Greenpeace](#)) are brief enough that I won't summarize, but I would add this:

The dialogue was framed partly around the topic of deforestation. Deforestation is a grave concern, but of course many other aspects of forest management are also important, e.g., protecting endangered species, respecting Indigenous Peoples' rights, protecting and restoring water quality, restoring a natural diversity of plants, animals, and structure in managed forests, managing for long-term timber volume and carbon storage, supporting worker equity, etc. Fortunately, many zero-deforestation commitments also cover other issues to varying degrees, and use the term deforestation as an overarching theme.

Balanced and robust forest certification – which at present is mainly available under the auspices of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) – is still likely to provide added value in the tropics, where zero deforestation commitments tend to apply, partly by providing consistent standards and a high level of transparency. Meanwhile, certification definitely remains relevant and valuable in temperate and boreal regions where deforestation *per se* is less an issue, but where other serious issues exist.

The United States is a good example of a region where deforestation is a less relevant rubric, but where significant supply chain risk remains. Too often, our public forests are still managed as if they are private timberlands, and too many private timberlands have exemptions from endangered species' protections, employ weak water quality protections, have lost much of their biodiversity and are managed as near mono-crops, are routinely doused in chemicals, etc. Some may even be logged at unsustainable rates. Commercial use of some GMO tree species has also just been authorized by the federal government. Meanwhile, in states like Washington and Oregon (which are among the top timber producers), mechanization and whole log exports are likely undermining the jobs element of the old "environment vs. jobs" rubric. Canada is yet another situation – with some of its forest controversies possibly falling under the "deforestation" concept, and many probably not.

Has certification single-handedly solved forest issues around the globe? Certainly not – nor is any other single tool or strategy likely to do it, given the challenges. I absolutely agree with the TFT that avoiding harmful, non-certified sources should be a priority for procurement officers. But this isn't a new idea, and credible certification plays a complimentary role by pointing to alternative sources. (Meanwhile, purchasers should be wary of weaker certification systems whose standards don't match their rhetoric.)

The suggestion that each purchaser company should establish its own vision of responsible forestry, and advance it through its supply chain is interesting. Surely there is value to companies engaging more deeply with such questions. But if every purchaser has a unique vision of responsible forestry, how will they create critical mass around any particular outcomes? Most purchasers only have so much leverage with their suppliers – and any one forestry company's products likely go to multiple end-purchasers.

As with forestry, there is also potential for agricultural certification to become more effective than it has been at times. And here too, the systems do continue to evolve, including (at least in some cases) to better address concerns like worker compensation and equity, not to mention deforestation.

One challenge I see in the ag sector is the profusion of different certification systems. Competition can be a good thing. However, as with forestry, there is risk of weak systems undercutting the more independent and balanced ones. And the larger number of players in the ag sector may make it difficult to establish a market leader and drive change around specific priorities.

The ag sector has also seen the rapid emergence of single commodity sustainable purchasing systems governed largely by purchaser companies, as well as some purchasing guides run by a single NGO. They surely have value when filling voids not yet covered by certification, and they may also have the potential to take a harder look at their specific focal areas. However, stakeholders also point to inherent limitations of some schemes.

At the end of the day, whether you're with a purchaser company or an NGO, you'll want to evaluate your options on their merits, in the context of your situation. But here are some high-level questions to consider when choosing between certification and alternative strategies – or probably more realistically, between different combinations of certification and other approaches:¹

- Does the system/strategy's resource management standards genuinely balance environmental, social, and economic considerations, while effectively and consistently protecting sensitive resources and communities?
- Are all key environmental and social issues covered by the standards, including conservation of the underlying ecosystem? Or, if the system/strategy is more single-issue oriented, can you couple it with other supply chain tools for a more comprehensive overall approach?
- Are the standards transparent, consistent, and performance-oriented with regard to on-the-ground resource management practices and outcomes?
- Is resource manager performance verified by independent third-parties? If not, how subject is compliance information to interpretation or corruption, and how are producers' self-interest in downplaying concerns overcome? Would verification conducted by the purchaser company be cost-effective and suited to the level of supply chain risk? If NGOs or other sources are used to corroborate claims, do they have sufficient access to information about the resource lands?
- Is the system's governance also transparent, open to interested stakeholders, and balanced amongst environmental, social, and economic interests? Are there accessible and effective mechanisms for stakeholders to monitor and challenge potentially questionable claims?
- Will use of the system/strategy, including choices amongst verification options, provide credible, consistent, and transparent assurances not just to the purchaser company, but also to the company's customers and other stakeholders?
- Does the system/strategy have the potential to become a market leader, and create critical mass in driving supply chain innovation and improved on-the-ground resource management?
- Does the system/strategy encourage beyond-the-minimum performance? Alternately, does it facilitate step-wise entry by resource managers where standards are high?
- Does your overall supply chain strategy cover the need to both avoid controversial sources, and purchase from more responsible ones? If you are unable to source entirely from responsible sources, are you evaluating the remaining ones to ensure they are not problematic?

¹ *These are by no means sufficient questions for evaluating any particular certification system or alternative tool. For example, all-important questions about their substantive requirements must also be addressed.*