

Factsheet: Sustainable Timber

What is 'sustainable' timber?

A standard definition of sustainable timber, covering environmental, social and economic impacts, will typically consider three issues:

- Legality – that the forest owner/manager holds the legal right to harvest, and timber is harvested, processed and traded in compliance with relevant international, national and regional laws.
- Environmental Sustainability – that the forest is managed in a way which preserves the health of the forest for future generations. For example maintaining the resources of the forest, the health and biodiversity of the forest ecosystem.
- Social Sustainability – that timber is harvested, processed and traded with respect to the rights and working conditions of those directly affected, for example the traditional usage rights of indigenous populations, or the labour conditions of forest workers.

Illegal and unsustainable forest practices, together with land conversion for agriculture, are the main causes of deforestation and forest degradation. 50% of the world's forests have been lost in the last 50 years¹, with 130,000 km² lost annually. Deforestation today accounts for more than 18% of all global carbon emissions - more than the entire transport sector².

These changes have major social as well as environmental impacts. More than a fifth of the world's population, including many indigenous groups in the developing world, rely on forest resources for their livelihoods (FAO, World Bank)³, communities which are consequently vulnerable to deforestation and forest degradation. Poor labour conditions and security for workers in forestry and processing operations are also a concern in the timber industry. Respect for the ILO Core Conventions⁴ is increasingly referenced in sustainable timber policies.

Illegal timber

Illegal logging remains a major cause for concern globally, contributing significantly to deforestation and degradation, and threatening the livelihoods of forest communities and law-abiding commercial operators.

As of March 2013, the EU Timber Regulation (EUTR) requires all timber on the EU market to come from legal sources. Operators placing timber on the market for the first time are required to have a due diligence system in place.

The EUTR is a key element of the EU Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan that sets out actions to prevent the trade in illegal wood, to improve the supply of legal timber and to encourage demand for wood coming from sustainably managed forests. FLEGT has established Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) between the EU and several timber producing countries for the implementation of a

¹ See www.cpet.org.uk

² The Stern Report (2007) - Stern, N., *The Economics of Climate Change, The Stern Review*, Cabinet Office - HM Treasury, January 2007

³ See, for instance, www.fao.org/forestry/livelihoods/en/

⁴ Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87); Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98); Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29); Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105); Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138); Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182); Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100); Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111) - See online at: www.ilo.org

licensing system to ensure that no illegal wood enters the EU from participating countries. As of March 2013, six countries [Cameroon, Central African Republic, Ghana, Indonesia, Liberia, Republic of Congo (Brazzaville)] are developing the systems agreed under a VPA, six countries (Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Guyana, Honduras, Malaysia, Vietnam) are in a negotiating phase, and around 15 countries from Africa, Asia and Central and South America have expressed interest in VPAs .

Sustainable forest management (SFM)

SFM is derived from and must therefore consider the three main pillars of “sustainability”, taking into account economic, environmental and social criteria. Principles and indicators can vary from forest to forest, from country to country – its most widely, intergovernmentally agreed definition is that adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 2007⁵:

“Sustainable forest management, as a dynamic and evolving concept, aims to maintain and enhance the economic, social and environmental value of all types of forests, for the benefit of present and future generations. It is characterized by seven elements, including: (i) extent of forest resources; (ii) forest biological diversity; (iii) forest health and vitality; (iv) productive functions of forest resources; (v) protective functions of forest resources; (vi) socio-economic functions of forests; and (vii) legal, policy and institutional frameworks”.

There exist various international non-binding agreements on principles, criteria and indicators for SFM, which can be used in policies defining criteria for public procurement. The main ones are:

- Forest Principles. UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 (UNCED)
- Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE);
- African Timber Organization (ATO);
- International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO);
- Montreal Process on Criteria and Indicators for the Conservation and Sustainable Management of Temperate and Boreal Forests;
- Pan-European Forest Process on Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management (the Helsinki Process of the MCPFE).

For example, the six pan-European criteria for sustainable forest management refer to:

Maintenance and appropriate enhancement of forest resources and their contribution to global carbon cycles; Maintenance of forest ecosystem health and vitality; Maintenance, conservation and appropriate enhancement of biological diversity in forest ecosystems; Maintenance and appropriate enhancement of protective functions in forest management (notably soil and water); Maintenance and encouragement of productive functions of forests (wood and non wood) Maintenance of other socio-economic functions and condition⁶.

The main sustainable forest management certification schemes – FSC and PEFC (see section below) – also each provide a clear set of principles to define sustainability throughout the supply chain.

Social sustainability & fair trade

Social sustainability requires timber to be harvested, processed and traded with respect to the rights and working conditions of those directly affected, taking into consideration traditional usage rights of indigenous populations, labour conditions of forest workers, small and medium enterprises and community forests.

⁵ Secretariat of the Convention on the Biological Diversity. 2009. Sustainable Forest Management, Biodiversity and Livelihoods: A Good practice Guide. Montreal, 47 +iii pages.

⁶ Forest Europe – see online at: <http://www.mcpfe.org> [Last visited: March 2013]

Respect for the ILO Core Conventions throughout chain of custody is increasingly referenced in sustainable timber policies.

Unbalanced trading relationships within the timber industry also often mean that forest communities and small forest companies do not sufficiently benefit from the global market – receiving low prices for their produce, and enjoying little security of livelihood. As such, some fair trade initiatives are starting in the timber sector which seek to ensure that producers in the developing world receive a fair price for the goods they produce, and has proved successful in improving the lives of many families across the world for many other commodities . More on this can be found in the Fact Sheet on Fair Trade and Timber (see online at: www.sustainable-timber-action.org).

Sustainable forest management certification

Sustainable forest management certification schemes provide independent, third party verification that timber is sourced from sustainably managed forests. These schemes include mechanisms for tracing products from the forest of origin through the supply chain, to the end consumer. The certification of the supply chain is called Chain of Custody (CoC).

There are two main international schemes:

- The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) – www.fsc.org
- The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) – www.pefc.org

Both of these schemes require compliance with the principles of legality, environmental and social sustainability addressed above, including observing the ILO core conventions throughout the supply chain, and protecting the rights of indigenous populations. Most sustainable timber procurement policies accept either label as one way of demonstrating compliance with the sustainability requirements.

(Find out more about such Timber Certification Schemes in a separate factsheet – see online at: www.sustainable-timber-action.org)

Implications for procurers

The Sustainable Timber Action (STA) project aims to help public authorities in applying the above principles of sustainability in their timber procurement activities – both when procuring timber products (such as furniture) or works and services which use timber (such as construction).

The STA Guide provides clear advice on implementing this in practice, and can be [downloaded directly from the STA website](#). [Latest version of the STA Guide online at: www.sustainable-timber-action.org]

For more information on the Sustainable Timber Action (STA) project please visit
www.sustainable-timber-action.org



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