Forest Stewardship Council vs. Sustainable Forestry Initiative
A Comparison of the Standards

Developed by FSC-US
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What are the key difference between FSC and SFI?

The staff of the Forest Stewardship Council U.S. (FSC-US) developed the following comparison to answer one of the most common questions we receive: "What are the key differences between FSC and SFI?"

The comparison examines the forest management and chain-of-custody standards of the two systems, along with their approaches to governance. This document is intended to deepen the understanding of the certification systems for organizations with existing commitments to FSC or those who may be considering FSC certification or FSC purchasing.

It is important to note that this comparison focuses on what is allowable under each standard, i.e., the minimum requirements to be certified. We recognize that many SFI-certified forest managers significantly exceed the requirements of the SFI standard. By specifically identifying the major differences in the standards, we also hope to clarify for these forest managers what is required to achieve FSC certification.

The standards compared below are:

- Forest Stewardship Council Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship (FSC-STD-01-001 (version 4-0) EN) and Forest Stewardship Council – U.S. Forest Management Standard (version 1.0)
- Sustainable Forestry Initiative Requirements for the SFI Program 2010 – 2014

If you have questions or wish to explore the standards differences further, we encourage you to contact the staff of FSC-US.

Forest Management Standards	Forest Stewardship Council	Sustainable Forestry Initiative	Key Differences
Performance-based standards	Forest Management Certification is built upon performance-based requirements. This means that to be certified, specific forest conditions must be met. For example, FSC's US National Standard requires protection of old growth stands at the forest management unit level.	Requirements are generally plan- or program-based, not performance based. While plans or programs are required, these may or may not lead to actual on-the-ground performance. For example, SFI requires "support of and participation in plans or programs for the conservation of old-growth in the region of ownership."	FSC emphasizes outcomes in the forest. SFI emphasizes plans or programs that may or may not lead to outcomes in the forest. E.g., FSC requires protection of rare old growth. SFI requires "participation in….plans or program….in the region of ownership".
Consistency of standards	Global Principles & Criteria (P&C) establish overarching positions on forest management issues such as forest ecology, deforestation, plantation management, use of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO), and community and indigenous rights. The fundamental components of FSC's forest management standards (P&C) are uniform worldwide. Indicators of conformance to P&C are determined by national committees and approved by FSC. One US National Standard, with regional variations to address differences in ecology (e.g., forest type, animal habitat).	Some indicators reference state-level voluntary forest management guidelines and laws, which lead to high levels of variation in acceptable management between states, regardless of forest type. Many other indictors rely on the establishment of or participation in programs and plans, which can vary widely from one SFI participant to the next. Full recognition of all wood and fiber from Canadian Standards Association and American Tree Farm System certifications leads to additional variability in the standard.	Variation in FSC standards is based on differences in forest ecology and local social conditions, as determined by national and/or regional standards development committees. Variation in the SFI standard derives from its reliance on plans and programs (rather than on-the-ground performance), differences in voluntary guidelines and state laws, and sometimes ambiguous indicators.
Sustainable harvest levels	Requires forest growth to meet or exceed harvest at the planning unit level over a rolling average of no more than ten years, to prevent a cumulative depletion. There are exceptions allowed for individual small ownerships and restoration purposes, for example, on lands affected by a catastrophic fire or where poor past management has led to an ecologically problematic species mix.	Program participants must have a plan (including an inventory, growth and yield models, maps, and recommended sustainable harvest level) and must document annual harvest trends in relationship to their plan.	Other than exceptions noted, FSC does not allow harvest to exceed growth. FSC growth calculations and resulting annual allowable cut estimates cannot include reserves, riparian areas, or other areas excluded from harvest. SFI allows harvest to exceed growth over a rotation or longer and offers no protection against cumulative depleting activities. SFI calculates harvest level by ownership, rather than at the planning unit level, thereby allowing over-harvest on portions of large ownerships with 'compensatory' growth far away. The impacts of these actions over time can include diminished biodiversity and reduction in ecological values associated with older forests and complex forest ecosystems.
Conserves biodiversity and old growth	Requires protection of forest ecosystems and functions, including genetic, species, and ecosystem diversity. In the US, where old growth is rare, the extent and values associated with old growth are strictly protected. Additionally, forest managers must dedicate a portion of the forest to restoration of old growth where it is under-represented.	Requires a "program to promote the conservation of native biological diversity." No detail is provided beyond this. "Support of and participation in plans or programs for the conservation of old-growth in the region of ownership." No requirement for a dedicated portion of the forest to be restored.	FSC requires on the ground maintenance and/or restoration of native biodiversity and protection of rare old-growth forest stands. SFI requires programs, but does not require outcomes from those programs. *Note: For SFI, "region of ownership" includes lands outside the ownership, such as adjoining state and national parks, etc.*

Forest Management Standards	Forest Stewardship Council	Sustainable Forestry Initiative	Key Differences
Forest conversion to non-forest	Prohibits conversion of natural forest to non-forest. Exceptions may be approved in limited cases, where there is very clear environmental benefit, such as where conversion and sale of a very small part of a management unit leads to investment and management of higher conservation value forest management on the rest of the land.	Deforestation is allowed without limit. No specific standard requirement for forest management. Materials from known deforestation must be discounted from SFI input credits, although the forest manager does not lose certification. Because fiber from other certification programs that do not address deforestation are accepted, there is no mechanism to ensure conversion sources are not included as certified-forest content in SFI claims.	FSC prohibits deforestation, except in circumstances that result in substantial and long-term environmental improvement. SFI permits deforestation and accepts fiber from other certification systems that do not address conversion.
High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF)	Requires protection of ecological values associated with High Conservation Value Forests. This includes a requirement to identify and protect the following: • Large intact forests and areas of concentrated biodiversity • Large forests with most or all species in natural patterns of abundance • Rare, Threatened or Endangered ecosystems • Areas providing critical ecosystem services • Areas critical to basic needs, such as subsistence or public health • Areas important to traditional cultural identity of local communities Requires managers to map and maintain defining attributes of HCVF, and to use the "precautionary approach" to prevent loss of defining attributes where there is uncertainty. Requires public consultation about HCVF and managers must provide a public summary.	No comprehensive requirement. Forest managers are required to have a program to locate and protect forests that have viable occurrences of imperiled plant or animal species or ecological communities, which are referred to as Forests of Exceptional Conservation Value.	FSC broadly defines HCVF to capture the wide array of important environmental and social values associated with unique forests. FSC requires forest managers to complete an HCVF assessment prior to activities that might adversely affect these forests. FSC requires public consultation during both the assessment process and management of HCVF, including a public summary of monitoring of these areas. SFI requires a plan to protect species and ecological communities that are also generally protected by state and federal law. No ongoing monitoring is required.
Protection of Rare, Threatened or Endangered (RTE) species	Requires protection of Rare, Threatened or Endangered (RTE) species, based on credible scientific analysis, assessments of potential impacts to RTE species prior to any harvest, and safeguards to protect and/or enhance RTE species. The definition of "Rare" is extended far beyond state and federal listings to include a broader suite of vulnerable species. This includes not just formally identified threatened and endangered species, but also species at risk of becoming threatened or endangered.	Standard requires "a program to protect federal- or state-listed threatened or endangered species." Additionally requires a program to locate "viable occurrences" of globally imperiled species, which would generally trigger legal protection.	FSC covers vastly more species in its definition of RTE and requires protection of all. SFI definitions include only globally imperiled species, which are generally already protected by state, federal or international laws. SFI does not require protection, instead requiring a "program to protect."
Protection of water quality	Requires expanded protection for rivers, lakes and other water bodies from direct impacts, erosion and chemical runoff, where laws or voluntary forest management guidelines are insufficient to protect water quality.	Requires conformance to state-level laws and voluntary forest management guidelines, which vary considerably between states.	FSC requires forest managers to protect water quality, going beyond state laws and voluntary guidelines, where necessary. SFI only requires adherence to state-level laws and implementation of voluntary guidelines.

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Protected natural areas	Requires protection of representative samples of existing ecosystems.	No specific requirement.	FSC requires protection for under-represented ecosystem types, including reference areas, ecological communities, and refugia for more common species, to ensure that they don't become rare. SFI does not address this concept.
Plantations	No certification of plantations on lands converted from natural forests after 1994. In the US, conversion of natural or semi-natural forest to plantations is prohibited. Additional actions are required for certification of plantation management, including managing portions to natural forest conditions. Requires maintenance or restoration of a portion of a forest management unit to natural forest conditions (at least 25% for management units greater than 10,000 acres).	No specific requirement.	FSC does not allow conversion of natural forests to plantations. The vast majority of FSC-certified plantations are on areas that are reforested agricultural lands and pastures. SFI permits conversion of natural forests to plantations. SFI has no requirements for natural forest maintenance or restoration.
Even-aged management (clearcuts) in natural forests.	Ecological functions and values must remain intact after harvest. In some forest types, clearcuts are not allowed. Large clearcuts are never allowed where they threaten ecological integrity of the forest. Size limits for clearcuts in the US are based on forest types and the natural disturbance regimes associated with those forest types: • Pacific Coast (6 acres) • Appalachia (10 acres) • Mississippi Alluvial Valley (20 acres) • Ozarks (2 acres) • Ouachitas (20 acres) For plantations, limit clearcuts to a 40-acre average and an individual maximum of 80 acres in the US. *Note: Allowable clearcut sizes are significantly larger in the Boreal forest of Canada, where wind and fire naturally cause large disturbances.*	No specific requirement to maintain ecological functions and values after harvest. No size limit on individual clearcuts. Clearcuts must not exceed an average of 120 acres across the entire ownership, which may span multiple states and need not be contiguous.	FSC requires that clearcuts in natural forests mimic natural processes. Strict maximum size limits correspond to natural processes. SFI does not limit the use of clearcuts, other than via the 120-acre average, which can be manipulated by combining more expansive clearcuts with much smaller ones during the same harvest period.
Chemical use	Restricts the use of specific pesticides that exceed thresholds of persistence, toxicity, carcinogenicity, bioaccumulation and other human health and environmental concerns not covered by law. Chemicals that are identified as highly hazardous and restricted include atrazine, hexazinone, and 2,4-d, which are commonly used in the U.S. forestry industry. Limited exceptions for use of some chemicals are granted based on site-specific justification and no viable alternatives. Application by trained and qualified workers is required.	Requires managers to minimize the use of chemicals to the amount needed to achieve objectives, use the least toxic and narrowest spectrum necessary, and use integrated pest management "where feasible." Requires chemical application team supervisors who are trained or certified applicators. Not all workers are required to be trained or certified.	FSC prohibits chemicals that are known to be highly hazardous, even though they are in regular use by forest managers in the US. FSC permits temporary exemptions with restrictions on uses and application methods, based on site-specific justification that includes ecological benefits. SFI permits application of all chemicals allowed by law.

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Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO)	Prohibited.	No specific requirement.	FSC prohibits Genetically Modified Organisms. SFI has no requirements addressing Genetically Modified Organisms.
Logger training	Requires qualified professionals, including loggers, to ensure safety and compliance with the management plan.	Requires support for logger certification and training programs.	FSC does not require support for logger training. SFI requires participants to support logger training programs.
Aesthetics	Does not address aesthetics in the Principles and Criteria. The US recognizes a very minor role of aesthetics. It is only noted as one of multiple social impacts of management activities that forest managers must address.	Requires a program to address visual quality management. Additionally requires incorporation of aesthetic considerations in harvesting, road, landing design and management, and other management activities where visual impacts are a concern.	FSC places emphasis on ecological and social conditions in the forest. SFI places an emphasis on requirements related to visual quality and aesthetics.
Local community benefit	Requires outreach to local community representatives to protect their rights and resources.	No requirements on private lands. On public lands, outreach is required for planning and management activities.	FSC requires local community engagement in multiple areas and for all forest ownership types. SFI only requires community engagement on public lands.
Indigenous rights	Requires outreach to tribal representatives and protection of their rights, resources and areas of cultural significance.	No requirements on private lands. On public lands, requirement to confer with affected indigenous peoples.	FSC explicitly protects indigenous rights, both legal and traditional, on public and private lands. SFI requires engagement with indigenous groups only on public lands.
Public consultation	Requires stakeholder consultation on all lands, public and private. Includes a mandatory list of categories of stakeholders to consult for medium to large-scale forest operators. Requires a public summary of the management plan.	No requirements on private lands. On public lands only, requires "appropriate contact" with the general public. No public summary of the management plan required.	FSC requires public consultation on private and public lands, with specific guidance on how consultation shall occur. SFI only requires consultation on public lands and does not specify parameters.
Research	Does not require research or participation in research programs.	Requires financial or in-kind support for relevant research in the areas of forest health, productivity, and management.	FSC does not require support for research. SFI does require support for research.

Chain of Custody Standards	Forest Stewardship Council	Sustainable Forestry Initiative	Key Differences
Unacceptable sources of raw materials for non-certified portions of mixed products	Avoid sourcing wood or wood fiber that meets any of the following criteria: • Illegally harvested • Harvested in violation of traditional and civil rights • Harvested in forests where High Conservation Values are threatened by management activities • Harvested in natural forests being converted to plantations or non-forest uses • From forests where Genetically Modified trees are planted.	Requires avoidance of controversial sources from countries without effective laws addressing workers' health and safety, fair labor practices, indigenous peoples' rights, anti-discrimination and anti-harassment measures, prevailing wages and workers' right to organize. The US and Canada have been determined to be low risk for controversy.	FSC has a comprehensive and stringent definition of unwanted sources of wood and wood fiber that includes ecological threats such as deforestation, threats to HCVF, and GMO use. SFI criteria are limited to illegal logging and worker health, safety, and rights. US and Canada are determined to be low risk for these two criteria.
Third-party certification required for all certified input claims	Yes	No	FSC requires third-party certification for all input claims. SFI does not require third-party certification for all input claims.
Claims for 100% non-certified virgin fiber inputs	<u>Public claims for non-certified inputs are not allowed.</u> Only allows claims associated with certified inputs or verified recycled inputs.	<u>SFI allows public claims for non-certified inputs.</u> The SFI Certified Sourcing label is allowed for companies that conform to SFI fiber sourcing system requirements. Its use does not have to be associated with any certified forest or recycled content.	FSC does not allow public claims on non-certified products. SFI Certified Sourcing label may be applied to product lines with 100% non-certified and non-recycled inputs.
Recycled	Allows both pre- and post-consumer recycled, however only post-consumer recycled material counts towards the FSC recycled claim. Mill co-products, such as chips and sawdust, do not count as recycled inputs.	Pre- and post-consumer recycled inputs are counted as recycled materials.	FSC only counts post-consumer recycled content towards the FSC claim because materials that are pre-consumer have not been used before and would not be landfilled, thus it is misleading to consider them "recycled." SFI counts pre- and post-consumer material as recycled content.
Procurement systems for mills and other primary processors	Policy for Association prohibits certified companies and members from purchasing from suppliers that are in violation of policy criteria. These criteria include issues such as illegal logging, deforestation and threats to HCVF. No requirement to monitor or verify that purchased non-certified stumpage is harvested in compliance with industry-guidelines for forest management.	No Policy for Association exists. Requires a program to monitor and verify that purchased non-certified stumpage is harvested in compliance with industry guidelines for forest management.	FSC's Policy for Association prohibits procurement from companies with clearly egregious practices. SFI requires monitoring and verification that purchased stumpage be harvested in compliance with industry guidelines for forest management.
Public reporting	Requires a publicly available summary of audits, including a detailed list of "non-conformances."	Requires a public report of audits, with a general description of non-conformances. This must be posted on the SFI website only if the audited organization makes public claims.	FSC audits are always made public. SFI audits are made public, with less detail, when the company makes SFI claims.

Governance	Forest Stewardship Council	Sustainable Forestry Initiative	Key Differences
Open membership-based organization	Yes. Open to all organizations and individuals, with the exception of trade associations and government agencies. Members are divided into environmental, social and economic chambers, each with 1/3 of voting power. Members elect the board of directors at the national and international levels and decide on policy and governance motions at a triennial General Assembly.	No. A self-appointed board of directors governs the organization and serves as the decision-making body. This includes approval of all policies and standards.	FSC is an open, member-led organization with a member-elected leadership. Members make key organizational decisions at a triennial General Assembly. A self-appointed board exclusively governs SFI, making decisions regarding all policies and standards.
Board of directors	Elected by members with a balance of economic, social and environmental chamber representation.	Appointed by the existing board. Chamber-balanced representation, though a broad spectrum of environmental and social organizations has never been represented.	Any FSC member can be nominated for board seat to be decided by an open vote of the membership. SFI appoints board members in a closed process.
Decision making processes	High-level decisions, such as election to the board of directors or changes to the Principles & Criteria, are made by a vote of the membership. Each chamber (economic, social and environmental) has equal voting rights and majority support from all three chambers is required for approval. Lower-level processes, such as issue specific working groups, include chamber-balanced representation.	The board comprises 18 people, six from each chamber. Approval by 80% of the board of directors is required for decision-making. A motion can be approved with majority support from two chambers and less than majority from the third chamber. There is no mechanism to ensure balanced representation among the three chambers.	Fundamental changes to the FSC system require support from a majority of members from all three chambers. SFI makes decisions only within a self-appointed board. Decisions can be made without majority support of one chamber.
Geographic extent of the program	Global	United States and Canada	FSC is a global system. SFI is limited to the US and Canada.