

Board Bulletin, Volume 2

Third Party Certification and the Forest Practices Board Audits – 2010

Independent certification systems have become fairly common in BC. Virtually every major BC forest company, as well as British Columbia Timber Sales, has now achieved some type of forest certification, and many small forestry operators, mills and manufacturers are making certification a priority. By 2010, there were over 54 million hectares (133 million acres) in BC certified by one of the three major systems – Canadian Standards Association (CSA) with 31.4 million hectares, Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) with 20.1 million hectares, and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), with 2.6 million hectares.¹ In fact, BC has more certified forest land than most countries in the world, except Canada as a whole.

A common element of all certification systems is independent third party audits done by the certifier. Audits are done initially as part of the certification process, and then periodically to maintain certification. Some companies also carry out their own internal audits as part of their management processes. Add to this BC Forest Safety Council audits and the random audits done by the Forest Practices Board, and it's not unusual for a company to have auditors appear at their door several times in a single year.

The Board is very aware of the strain on resources this can present for a company. The Board also recognizes that certification has had a positive impact on the quality of forest practices in BC. A review of Board audit findings from the past five years shows that certified companies are in compliance with provincial legislation most of the time. While this might lead some to conclude that Board audits are unnecessary, there are a number of reasons why this is not the case.

- The Board is an independent public agency, acting on behalf of the public of BC—the owners of the Crown forest land audited—and not on behalf of the company, or a certifying organization hired by the company.
- All Board reports are provided to the public and the data used to establish conclusions is also available. The complete results of a third party certification audit may or may not be available to the public.

¹ Naturally Wood Website: <http://www.naturallywood.com/Sustainable-Forests/Third-Party-Certification.aspx>

- Board audits are required by legislation² and, unlike certification audits, participation is mandatory, not voluntary.
- Independent certifiers do some ground-based assessments to determine compliance, but they also rely on other sources of information, such as government compliance and enforcement records. As government's limited enforcement resources are increasingly being directed to other non-forestry risks to the Crown land base, Board audits are becoming a more important source of information about forest company compliance.
- The Board also has the authority to undertake special investigations to examine issues that go beyond what might be covered in an audit. For example, the Board can look at the activities of a group of licensees and can look across the landscape, rather than just within a single operating area, or a single licensee's operating areas.
- While the majority of the volume harvested in BC is certified, the majority of forest licences in BC remain uncertified. These licences are generally smaller operations such as woodlots, community forests and non-renewable forest tenures.
- The Board can also examine the forestry operations of other industries, such as oil and gas companies, public utilities and independent power producers, and can and does comment on landscape level issues/opportunities.
- Finally, Board audits can lead to recommendations aimed at improving provincial forestry legislation and policy, or improving the forest practices of all companies operating on BC Crown forests, not just the company audited.

The Board is sensitive to the potential for duplication and added costs to forest licensees. It is taking steps to address these concerns by: using independent certification information and audit results to reduce field work where possible; providing audit results to certifiers to reduce their work and the associated costs to the auditee; and considering certification in assessing risk and sampling forestry activities.

Board audits can and do complement certification audits, but Board audits are also market-independent and are essential to continuous improvement of regulation and implementation of sound forest practices on BC's public forest land.

² *Forest and Range Practices Act and Regulations; Wildfire Act and Regulations.*