



Maryland Department of Natural Resources-Forest Service Leadership by Example: An SFI Certification Case Study



Introduction

Maryland's forests contribute a great deal to our state's natural beauty, economy and recreational opportunities. We have chosen to certify our state forest lands to both the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standards. The standards are very similar and we strive to be inclusive of all certification systems. In this case study, we focus on the value SFI certification has brought to the state.

Background

The State of Maryland began its journey toward SFI certification in 1999, when it entered into a purchase agreement for 58,000 acres of forestland being divested by the Chesapeake Forest Products Corporation. The state's acquisition of this forestland generated a high level of concern because of its importance to the local forest products industry and the fact that the forests contained prime habitat for the federally listed Delmarva Fox Squirrel (DFS) and other sensitive species. To address concerns, approximately half of the acreage that was considered to contain the most environmentally sensitive areas was deeded directly to the state. The other half of the acreage, considered to be best suited for intensive fiber management, was acquired by the Conservation Fund on behalf of the Richard King Mellon Foundation, with the express intention of being transferred to the state at a later time. During the transition to state control, there was a requirement to pursue certification to the SFI Standard as part of the contractual obligation.

The state strongly supported the contractual requirement to seek SFI certification, realizing that SFI certification would be an excellent way to reassure stakeholders that the state's management would be sustainable – socially, economically, and environmentally – and that this would be verified via a rigorous and independent third-party audit process. Additionally, the MD Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Forest Service, the agency responsible for managing the new acquisition, realized that obtaining SFI certification would provide several corollary benefits. One immediate benefit would be to raise the profile of sustainable forestry in Maryland, as this would be the first time any state managed lands would be opened up for scrutiny by independent third-party auditors. To accentuate this new approach, the decision to pursue forest certification was officially launched by the issuance of a Gubernatorial Executive Order. The MD DNR Forest Service also believed that the process of seeking and obtaining SFI certification would help the agency by identifying potential improvements to on-the-ground management activities and by providing an enhanced "social license" to practice sustainable forestry. Additionally, the agency saw SFI certification as a way to provide new market opportunities to the state's forest products industry with SFI certified fiber.



Implementing SFI Certification – Continual Improvement

The first step towards obtaining SFI certification was to carefully review the Sustainable Forestry Management Plan (SFMP) and the management practices on the Chesapeake Forest to ensure they were in alignment with the SFI standards. Much effort was exerted to improve the existing GIS database and careful attention was given to harvest level planning in regards to long-term sustainability. The next step in the process was to undergo an initial Scoping Audit/Gap Analysis with the selected auditing firm to confirm understanding of the standards, and to prepare for and outline expectations of the initial certification audit.

After completing these necessary steps, the MD DNR Forest Service scheduled its initial SFI certification audit in 2003, covering the portion of Chesapeake Forest that was under joint state-contractor management. The audit was both rewarding and enlightening. SFI certification was achieved and the audit confirmed that most on-the-ground forest practices were in conformance with the SFI standards. However, the audit also demonstrated that the agency needed to do a better job of documenting decision processes and developing written policies that verified the practices being implemented on the forest. Over the next two years of surveillance audits, the MD DNR Forest Service went through a process of continual improvement to ensure the agency management systems complied with the SFI standards. During this period a number of policies were developed, such as formal retention standards, invasive species standards, rutting standards, requirements for using only Master Loggers on state harvests, improved employee training on various SFI processes, and increased safety training. Greater attention was also given to logging operations to ensure all required BMPs were implemented and corrective actions were taken when needed. Over the next eight years, the MD DNR expanded SFI certification on additional state lands, culminating in 2011 with SFI certification on all the major State Forests in Maryland (211,000 acres) with gubernatorial support for the effort.

Lessons Learned and Looking towards the Future

Going through the process to obtain SFI certification has proved to be a highly positive experience for the MD DNR Forest Service. As a result of SFI certification, the agency has greatly improved on-the-ground management collaboration with the MD DNR Natural Heritage ecologists. All of Maryland's State Forests now have prescriptive management recommendations for endangered species habitat and environmentally sensitive sites included in the SFMPs. Previously, forest management in these areas was simply delineated by exclusion zone lines drawn on stand maps. The agency has also forged stronger relationships with key external partners, such as forest industry and private conservation groups, due to various certification processes requiring the agency to involve these stakeholders in certain aspects of management planning. Internally, the agency has developed a more vibrant focus on continual improvement, knowing that the next SFI audit is "just around the corner". Additionally, since the agency's practices are reviewed and recognized as being sustainable through the independent SFI certification audit process, the MD Forest Service has received more credibility and visibility regarding its sustainable forest management practices.

Looking to the future, the Maryland DNR Forest Service expects SFI certification to increase in both importance and value as demand for certified fiber continues to expand in the marketplace. Additionally, since the vast majority of forestland in the state of Maryland is in private ownership (76%), SFI's recognition of the American Tree Farm System certification, which is designed for small family forests, fits well with the agency's goal to increase interest and participation in forest certification on private land. By virtue of achieving and maintaining SFI certification on the public lands the agency is responsible for managing, it is able to demonstrate "leadership by example" when it communicates the benefits of forest certification to private landowners.
