

Briefing: Sustainable timber procurement

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Demand for forest products with chain of custody certification—the unbroken path which products take from an independently certified forest to the consumer—has grown dramatically in the last three years, from all fronts, not least from central government. This briefing note outlines how the various certification schemes have evolved and discusses the issues surrounding them.

Suppliers and buyers have never been more aware of the need to prove the credentials of timber products—nor better placed to do so.

Awareness began with a hard-hitting campaign by environmental groups in the 1970s and 1980s to highlight the plight of the tropical rainforests. This was stepped up by world leaders following the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and action groups have kept up the pressure ever since.

Sadly, however, a forest area the size of a football pitch is lost every two seconds, largely because of illegal logging, and most commercial tropical tree species are still at risk of extinction.

To combat these problems, various certification schemes are now in place. The most widely known is the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) scheme, formed in 1993 and accounting now for nearly 60 million ha of certified forest around the world. Several thousand products are produced using FSC-certified wood and carrying the FSC trademark. FSC operates through its network of National Initiatives in more than 34 countries.

The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) followed in 1999 and has achieved rapid growth. It now has in membership 32 independent national forest certification systems, of which 21 to date have been through a rigorous assessment. These 21 schemes account for over 175 million ha of certified forests, producing millions of tonnes of certified timber to the market.

Together, FSC and PEFC cover a wide range of timber and forest products (Fig. 1). Other schemes that have gained recognition are the Canadian Standards Authority (CSA) and the American Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), both recently accepted under PEFC, and the Malaysian National Timber Certification Council (MTCC) scheme.

Forest certification is a two-tier process. Forests are independently certified to a recognised standard at the first level.



Fig. 1. Together FSC and PEFC cover a wide range of timber and forest products

At the second level, operations in the timber supply chain are certified to allow them to buy and sell outputs from these forests as certified. This process is known as chain of custody certification, and is today having a significant impact on the way in which the UK timber and forest products industries buy and sell products (Figs 2 and 3).

Chain of custody is the unbroken path that products take from the forest to the consumer, including all stages of manufacturing,



Fig. 2. Marlow's Timber Engineering has achieved comprehensive chain of custody certification with BM TRADA



Fig. 3. The Ridgeon Group holds certification with BM TRADA for certified softwoods, hardwoods, sheet materials and engineered wood products

transportation and distribution. Demand for chain of custody certification has grown dramatically in the last three years to the extent that, for many companies, the ability to prove that a timber product has been derived from a well-managed source is now a key factor in the specification of timber products. Pressure is coming from all fronts, not least from central government, which has a very clear strategy on sustainable procurement.

Last year the UK government created a Central Point of Expertise in Timber (CPET), which reports to a management committee controlled under the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Its first task was to carry out a comparative analysis survey of which certification schemes were deemed acceptable as proof of either sustainable or legal sources. CPET now provides detailed information and advice on how public sector buyers and their suppliers can meet the UK government's timber procurement policy requirements in practice (www.proforest.net/cpet). Current guidelines are set out below.

- (a) *Legal compliance.* CSA, FSC, PEFC and SFI products all deliver government requirements for legality, as do 100% MTCC-certified products. Wood-derived products from Malaysia that contain a mix of certified and uncertified material do not satisfy the legality criteria under Category A (evidence of certification).
- (b) *Sustainability.* CSA products deliver UK government requirements for sustainability, and FSC-, PEFC- and SFI-certified products containing at least 70% certified material deliver the UK government requirements for sustainability.

It is the government's declared aim to bring about a step change in public procurement so that by 2009 the UK will be recognised among the leaders in sustainable procurement across the EU; the UK is already performing above the EU average on green procurement.

The biggest threat to effective chain of custody development, however, is the non-registered supplier. BM TRADA is working hard to inform specifiers that if a supplier does not have independent proof of chain of custody, the chain is broken. A merchant, for example, cannot claim chain of custody on the back of his supplier's certificate, without having his own. And even if a company does not take possession of the goods, the key indicator is ownership: if you take title to the goods you are potentially in scope of chain of custody certification.

Companies without chain of custody certification could lose out on the many opportunities to sell products, as the following list of market drivers suggests

- (a) UK government policy
- (b) UK government procurement
- (c) local authorities
- (d) housing associations: eco homes
- (e) financial institutions
- (f) retailers
- (g) UK construction: 4 million new homes
- (h) architects.

Having chain of custody certification will enable companies to retain and develop business, enhance their corporate image, and improve their market branding. As well as the obvious environmental and social benefits, certification, with its built-in requirement for a recognised management system, can also make businesses more efficient.

For further information on chain of custody certification please contact BM TRADA Certification. Tel: 01494 569700; email: enquiries@bctrada.com; web: www.bctrada.com. Other useful contacts: www.fsc.org; www.pefc.org; www.trada.co.uk

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