
Plantation certification review process: The future of the FSC at stake

With regards to plantation certification, FSC has reached a crossroads where no less than its credibility is at stake. The internal process for the review of plantation certification is fairly advanced and in September this year the Working Group set up for this purpose will submit its recommendations.

In this respect, it is of interest to note that there are various worrying aspects in this process. On the one hand, since its initiation, FSC has continued to certify vast tracts of plantations. In 2002, when the Assembly decided to initiate the process, 3.3 million hectares had been certified. In 2004 when the review process was finally implemented, the figure had increased to 4.9 million hectares and today, it reaches 7.4 million hectares. Although WRM and other organizations formally requested a moratorium to the certification of plantations until the review process was finalized (see <http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/FSC/lettermoratorium.html>), the request was rejected.

Of even greater concern is the fact that there is talk of totally eliminating Principle 10 (that expressly refers to plantations). For years now we have pointed out the serious weaknesses of this principle – that enables practically any plantation to be certified – with the aim of substantially improving it (see <http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/FSC/comments.html>). To consider that its elimination would be a solution – as is the intention now – is, to say the least, astonishing. Furthermore, this would lead to an even greater conceptual confusion, because in this way FSC would definitively be considering that forests and plantations are synonymous.

It should also be noted that the present review process does not address a very important issue: that of the certification firms' vested interests, whose profits depend more on the quantity of hectares certified than on the quality of the certification they are carrying out (see article "The rot at the core of the FSC apple: Vested interest and so-called 'independent certification'").

As evidence of the above, it is illustrative to note FSC and the certification firms' reaction to the publication of an investigation by WRM on four plantations certified in Uruguay (see <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Uruguay/book.html>). Smartwood's reply in addition to adulterating the truth, does not respond to the criticism made in the report (see http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/FSC/fymnsa_clarifications.pdf). The other firm involved (SGS) prepared a reply which it submitted to FSC but did not make public. Based on the reply of the parties involved in the complaint and without contacting WRM or the author of the study, or launching an internal investigation, the Director of FSC International, Heiko Liedeker, publicly dismissed the report in a statement -issued on July 14, 2006- under the title of "FSC guarantees peace of mind to consumers" (available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/FSC/Peace_mind.pdf). As authors of this report, we can guarantee that none of these plantations should have been certified.

The attempt at reinterpreting existing criteria - that in fact are not complied with - is also a matter of concern, seeking to adapt the criteria to the plantations and not the other way round (see the comment on criteria 6.3 in article "FSC Plantations Review: Raising the Bar or Lowering Standards?"). In fact, if strict compliance with

all FSC principles and criteria were to be a requisite for plantation certification, no large-scale monoculture tree plantation could receive the FSC seal. However, thanks to the “flexibility” of the certifiers, they manage to obtain it in most cases.

Moreover, neither the FSC nor the Working Group seem to take seriously into account the documented evidence on the negative impact of plantations in general and of certified plantations in particular. However, the evidence showing the accumulated impact of the plantations, particularly on flora, fauna, water and society are abundant and show the need to consider the joint impact of all the plantations in a region and not just one in isolation.

Of course it is not up to us to tell the Working Group what it should do. But we can demand that the result of its work serves to ensure fulfilment of FSC’s express mandate that all certified operations (be these forests or plantations) are “environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable.” Given that many of the plantations presently certified do not comply with one, two or all of these three elements, it would be appropriate for their recommendations to include:

- the immediate de-certification of the most questioned plantations, whose social and environmental impacts have been sufficiently documented.
- the immediate launching of an independent investigation on all the other questioned plantations
- the implementation of a moratorium on further certification of major plantations until a serious study has been made of whether these large-scale monoculture tree plantations can or cannot comply with the three elements of the FSC mandate.

WRM’s position is well known regarding plantation certification by FSC as well as our opposition to the expansion of monoculture tree plantations in general. However, what is important to us in the present review process is that radical changes be introduced to avoid that – unintentionally – FSC should continue to undermine local struggles against companies that have an impact on the environment and on the local communities’ livelihoods. We are not concerned about definitions; it is people and their environment that are a matter of concern to us.

If this process does not lead to much stricter requirements for plantation certification, then it will have been useless. This would be a defeat for FSC as it would accelerate loss of support from social and environmental organizations ensuring its credibility. The case of Spain, where organizations are campaigning to convince others to withdraw from FSC (see article below) should be taken seriously into account.

In short, the Working Group is presently facing an enormous responsibility. It can choose to “change something so nothing changes” or it can introduce radical changes in the policy implemented so far. The future credibility of the organization depends on the option it chooses.