
[Laos: FSC certified timber is illegal](#)

When a forestry operation is certified under the Forest Stewardship Council system, it should mean we can all relax in the knowledge that the forests are reasonably well managed. Unfortunately, it seems, this is not the case. SmartWood, an FSC accredited certifier, recently certified forestry operations in Laos which are producing timber that is illegal under the Lao Forestry Law.

The FSC certification is the result of more than a decade of aid projects and millions of dollars of aid money. Between 1996 and 2000, a project funded by the World Bank and the Finnish government set up a series of Village Forestry Associations in Savannakhet and Khammouane provinces in Laos. The project, part of the Forest Management and Conservation Programme (FOMACOP), aimed to develop a model of "village forestry", through which villagers would log the forests and receive a share of the money from the timber.

The first attempt to determine whether "village forestry" could be FSC certified came in 1999. But Lao government officials were unhappy about any outside monitoring of forestry operations. Rumours spread that government officials were worried about losing a lucrative source of income: bribes from the logging industry. FOMACOP collapsed in 2000, shortly after the failed certification attempt.

The World Bank and the Finnish government subsequently set up another project, this time called the Sustainable Forestry and Rural Development Project (SUFORD). In May 2003, SmartWood assessed the forest management. In January 2006, after a series of conditions were met to SmartWood's satisfaction, SmartWood issued an FSC certificate for 39,000 hectares of forest managed by six villages in Savannakhet province. A month earlier, SmartWood issued a certificate for about 10,000 hectares of village forestry in Khammouane province.

WWF supported the certification together with the Tropical Forest Trust, an organisation set up in 1999 to expand the area of FSC certified forest in the tropics. "FSC certification of these forests is a giant step forward for sustainable forestry and conservation in the region," said Roland Eve, WWF's Country Director in Laos.

But a leaked consultant's report from the World Bank- and Finland-financed SUFORD project tells a different story. The report documents the findings of a visit by a team from the Lao Forestry Department and a consultant to the SUFORD project, Tomas Jonsson. The team visited Thapanthong district in Savannakhet province between March and May 2006.

The team found that the certified logging operations are not carried out in accordance with management plans. "Documents were scattered and parts were missing" and "only partially understood" by local forestry staff, loggers and villagers, according to Jonsson's report.

The team found that the villagers and local forestry staff were "next to unable to use the tree maps". The maps were found to be inaccurate. In the forest, trees to be logged were not adequately marked. Unmarked trees had been logged. Some marked trees were left standing. Resin trees used by villagers had been cut. Some large, good quality logs were left in the felling area. Skid trails were not

as marked on the maps. Hardly surprising, as the logging crew didn't have copies of the maps. Neither did they have safety equipment or protective gear. Logging crews lived under a tarpaulin, in a logging camp with no washing facilities or toilets.

More trees were logged than in the management plans because the province issued logging quotas "over and above the harvestable volumes as per approved logging plans." Several areas had been logged which were not yet supposed to be harvested according to the management plans. The team also found signs that villagers were felling and processing sawnwood within the certified area.

The team concluded that logging is not controlled by the management plans but is driven by the demand from an ever increasing number of local sawmills. Logging plans are interpreted "as giving the right to cut a certain volume instead of specifically permitting the selected and marked trees to be removed," according to Jonsson's report.

With FSC certification it should be possible to trace wood back to the specific location that it came from in the forest, through a system of marking and tracking the timber. "In all inspected locations (forest, landing, mill)," the team found that "no tree or log was marked as per requirement." Logs that were marked did not have the appropriate number and were often marked with chalk. "Tracing and chain of custody of trees/logs is therefore impossible," Jonsson wrote in his report.

The control team also found evidence of illegal logging logging in areas where management plans were non-existent or not yet approved. Without adequate timber marking, there is no way of knowing whether timber from these or any other illegal operations is being passed off as FSC certified timber.

But SmartWood knows all this. SmartWood's assessors issued a condition which states that "By the end of Year 1, all logs must contain clear and lasting marks (e.g. paint or chops) to identify the village, strip, and log number."

It is illegal under the Lao Forestry Law to move logs that are not appropriately marked. Before SmartWood's condition is met, therefore, FSC certified timber from Savannahkhet is illegal under Lao law.

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