
PEFC: Endorsement of non-credible certification schemes in the South

The PEFC was set up between 1998 and 1999 by the national forestry interest groups – mainly associations of small-forest owners in several European countries as the Pan European Forest Certification Scheme. It changed to its current name after having endorsed other non-European schemes. The scheme is governed by the PEFC Council, which consists of representatives of national certification schemes and are the PEFC's members. The PEFC is not a single certification scheme with a single standard, but a programme for the endorsement of national certification schemes.

As with other certification schemes, although the PEFC was supposed to certify forest management, it has also included tree plantations as being certifiable “forests”.

A number of characteristics of PEFC make it the perfect label for unsustainable plantations in the South, as can be seen in the two articles below on certification in Chile and Brazil.

As a FERN report (2004) states, “In all PEFC standards, indigenous rights are not recognised”, adding that “This is of particular concern, as PEFC will soon incorporate tropical schemes where the indigenous rights and land rights issues are of great concern.” This has already happened.

In its report, FERN also considered that “PEFC’s failure to give full recognition to the land rights of local people is a serious omission, as is its lack of a requirement for proper consultation with local stakeholders during the certification process. This is particularly relevant as the PEFC is about to endorse non-European schemes in countries where the discussion about land rights and reform of forestry laws holds the key to improved forest management. Without recognising this issue, the PEFC seriously risks coming under attack from a wide range of social and environmental organisations in these countries as well as in the North.”

Such concern is now a reality: plantations in Chile and Brazil, strongly opposed by the indigenous peoples whose lands were taken over by plantation companies have received a label endorsed by PEFC. The sole reason for PEFC not having come “under attack” in the South is that the certification schemes it has endorsed have so little credibility that they have not even merited attention by organizations involved in the struggle against plantations.

The FERN report also states that PEFC “has not yet changed the fundamentals of the system by embracing equal participation of different stakeholder groups. It still gives the forestry industry and forest owners dominance in the development of the programme and in the development of the standards. It is, therefore, not an independent scheme.” In addition “Stakeholder consultation during the certification process is not required, although some national schemes have carried out stakeholder consultations.” To make matters worse, “field visits are not in all cases required.”

The above means that in countries such as Chile and Brazil the standards are simply set by the same plantation companies that will be certified, that adequate consultation is inexistent and that field trips are not even necessary –at least meaningful field trips.

As expressed by FERN, “the threshold for endorsement is so low, that most certification schemes can qualify.” This has been proven true.

In this respect, FERN says “PEFC France, which has no clear minimum performance standards, does not certify at FMU [Forest Management Unit] level and does not require any field visits” and warns that “This does not bode well for the forests certified by tropical certification schemes that now want to accede to the PEFC.” This has also proved to be true: hundreds of thousands of hectares of plantations scattering in thousands of management units –which were never visited by certifiers- are now certified in Chile and Brazil under the PEFC umbrella.

In sum, PEFC endorsement may have credibility in a few European countries, but in the two schemes analysed below (CERFLOR and CERTFOR), it has simply become the tool for providing market access to some of the worse type of socially and environmentally damaging large-scale tree monocultures.

- FERN (2004).- Footprints in the forest. Current practice and future challenges in forest certification.
http://www.fern.org/media/documents/document_1890_1900.pdf