
Thailand: FSC should revoke Forest Industry Organisation certificate

In June 2001, two teak plantations managed by Thailand's Forest Industry Organisation (FIO) were awarded a certificate as "well managed" under the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) system. The plantations, at Thong Pha Phum and Khao Krayang, were assessed by SmartWood, a non-profit organisation run by Rainforest Alliance, a US-based NGO.

Despite the fact that the certified area covers less than 3.5 per cent of FIO's total plantation area, the certificate enables FIO to claim that it is practising "sustainable forest management". Before the assessment was carried out, FIO's Chittiwat Silapat told the Bangkok Post, "It's a major step towards the end of deforestation and the beginning of sustainable development."

FIO is a state-owned forestry enterprise formed in 1947 with the mandate to manage logging concessions in Thailand. FIO effectively organised the destruction of Thailand's forests until the logging ban of 1989. FIO has also established plantations on 140,000 hectares in Thailand, often without the consent of the local communities who were using the land. Certification under FSC enables FIO to cover up its history and its financial problems, which have become severe since the logging ban deprived the organisation of its main source of income.

SmartWood did not include FIO's history in its assessment. Jeffrey Hayward, SmartWood's team leader in Thailand, explained, "Certification is a way for any forestry operation to demonstrate that it has changed and is changing for the better. We are solution oriented. The past is a vital part of history and development, but how does it impact the present and future?".

This ignores the fact that SmartWood is partly determining FIO's "right to be around" by ignoring the reality of social opposition to its very existence. In describing SmartWood as "solution oriented" in this context, Hayward is looking for solutions for FIO. SmartWood seems to be prepared to go to great lengths to find these solutions.

There are no FSC national standards and no national initiative to develop such standards in Thailand. In such cases, FSC certifying bodies should develop an interim standard which should be circulated to "stakeholders" one month before the certification decision. SmartWood failed to do so and simply used the SmartWood "Generic Guidelines for Assessing Forest Management".

When faced with criticism that national level consultation with NGOs and civil society in Thailand was inadequate, Richard Donovan of Rainforest Alliance and SmartWood's Jeffrey Hayward responded, "We felt that we needed to aggressively consult with local stakeholders and we did so, not just during the assessment but in subsequent pre-certification visits to Thailand by SmartWood staff."

Yet, villagers living near the two plantations have never heard of either FSC or SmartWood. Somsak Ratanawaraha, the village head man of Ban Nam Tok Poi near Khao Krayang plantation, is listed as consulted in SmartWood's Public Summary of the assessment. When asked about the consultation process in August 2002, he said, "We didn't talk about anything, they only asked me questions. They didn't talk about FSC. They didn't talk about certification at all. They were talking about the plantation

and what benefits are coming."

Virawat Dheeraprasert, chairperson of Foundation for Ecological Recovery (FER) a Thai NGO, commented, "Local people have so far been totally unaware of the SmartWood process and the certification. There has been absolutely no local participation. Which means in effect that FSC is supporting a process that violates the very basic principles of Thailand's constitution."

In accordance with FSC rules, SmartWood has produced a public summary of its assessment of FIO's plantations. According to a motion passed at the FSC General Assembly in 1999, public summaries must provide sufficient information "to make clear the correlation between the specific results of the certification assessment and the FSC Principles and Criteria."

SmartWood's public summary does not do this. For example, SmartWood set out 26 conditions which FIO must meet if the certificate is to remain in place, but the public summary does not explain to which of FSC's principles and criteria the conditions relate.

Fifteen of these conditions had to be met either immediately or within one year of the certificate being issued. In August 2001, Donovan and Hayward wrote, "They have to meet our conditions or the certificates will be revoked."

To check whether FIO had in fact met the conditions, SmartWood returned to Thailand in May 2002 and carried out a first year audit. They found that FIO had failed to meet five of the conditions and had only "partially met" seven more conditions. However, instead of revoking the certificate as promised, SmartWood issued a series of "corrective action requests" with new deadlines.

FIO hoped that SmartWood's first year audit would also include an assessment of five more plantations for potential inclusion in the FSC certificate. However, SmartWood recommended that one of the plantations, Ta Pla, should "not be considered as a potential entrant to the certified pool" on the grounds that "there were land tenure issues" which "would pose a high risk for non-compliance with [FSC's] Principle 2". FIO duly withdrew this plantation from the assessment and SmartWood assessed the remaining four. After a whirlwind six day tour of Thailand, including visits to five plantations, SmartWood concluded that "Regretably, during the on-site audit visits, there were substantive areas that need to be improved to be in compliance with FSC Principles 2, 3, and 5". Further explanation, however, is only available in the "confidential section" of SmartWood's audit report.

Two of FIO's plantations remain certified. Virawat Dheeraprasert said, "The failure to implement the conditions of the first year leads to our demand that FSC must revoke the certification." He added, "It's not necessary to talk of expanding certified areas, right now it is enough that FSC revokes the existing two areas that have been certified."

By: Chris Lang.