



This information note is one of a series produced by the Community Woodlands Association. It gives a brief overview of the forestry standards operating in the UK, describes the processes of forest certification and outlines the advantages and potential disadvantages of having your forest management and products independently certified.

“Forest certification is about more than just which trees are cut down (and re-generated) – it is also about the well-being of workers and local communities. Certification begins in the forest and continues through the entire timber trading chain to the sales outlet. The aim is to give consumers, the confidence that they’re buying a responsibly-harvested forest product.” WWF UK

Introduction

In the three decades since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, political and consumer concerns about general global sustainability and specific forestry issues such as deforestation and biodiversity loss, have driven public interest in ensuring that forest management is “sustainable”.

A range of national forest management standards and sustainability certification processes has evolved to meet these concerns. The costs of certification have meant that uptake has generally been confined to larger forest holdings and those focusing on marketing timber, rather than smaller woodland holdings.

About 59% of Scotland’s forest and woodland area is certified: this includes the entire public forest estate managed by Forestry and Land Scotland and about 39% of privately owned woodlands; collectively these certified forests account for 86% of the total softwood harvest.

It is important to understand that meeting forest management sustainability criteria does not guarantee sustainability in a broader sense: e.g. the UK (and global) forest industry is completely dependent on fossil fuels. On the other hand, if a woodland is not certified, this does not mean it is not sustainably managed.

Forest standards

There are two standards for forest management in the UK: UKFS and UKWAS.

[The UK Forestry Standard](#) (UKFS) is the national government reference standard for sustainable forest management in the UK.

It provides a basis for regulation and monitoring as well as ensuring UK compliance with international agreements and conventions on biodiversity, etc.

UKFS sets minimum standards for forest management: if you want to secure a felling licence or receive grant aid through the Forestry Grant Scheme, your proposals must be compliant with the standard. UKFS applies to all woodland, public and private, however there is nothing to compel forest owners/managers to comply with the standard if they aren’t felling trees or seeking grant aid.

The [UK Woodland Assurance Standard](#) (UKWAS) is a certification standard for verifying sustainable woodland management in the UK. It is owned and managed by a broad partnership and is independent of government. UKWAS is based on the requirements of international forest certification schemes as well as UKFS, and goes beyond the latter in terms of some of its requirements. Its principal purpose is to act as an audit protocol for the voluntary certification schemes, which are paid for by the forest or woodland owner.

Both standards have evolved and developed over time: the first UKFS was published in 1998 and the current edition (2017) is the 4th. Work is underway on a review with the aim of publishing a new version by the end of 2022. Likewise, UKWAS is periodically developed and updated in partnership with stakeholders in the UK. The current version is UKWAS 4 and consultation and re-drafting is underway to launch UKWAS 5 in 2023.

Certification bodies

The [Forest Stewardship Council](#) (FSC) & the [Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification](#) (PEFC) are two global certification organisations that set the criteria for the standards against which management and supply chains are assessed (anywhere in the World). Their logos appear on certified forest products. Both FSC and PEFC have adopted UKWAS as the standard for certification in the UK.

Both [FSC](#) and [PEFC](#) maintain public registers of certificate holders but do not issue certificates themselves. Independent certification bodies carry out the forest management and chain of custody assessments that lead to certification. In the UK these include the [Soil Association](#) (SA) and [SGS](#).

Forest Management (FM) certification covers forest management activities and is what you need if you are selling unprocessed timber. Chain of Custody (CoC) certification applies to companies that take the product from the forest and process it further or to a finished product and ensures that the certified product is not diluted by un-certified material.

Benefits of certification:

The primary motive for certification is often access to the widest range of markets for forest products and potentially a premium price. Most sawmills and other timber buyers can only use a limited volume of uncertified wood, so certification is essential for those producing regular, large volumes of timber.

A second common motive is that independent verification of sustainability can improve an owner's public image and highlight their commitment to the environment and social responsibility.

Additionally, most of the group certification schemes provide membership benefits, such as templates for recording chemical use and access to in-house health and safety updates. Scheme membership also gives an annual opportunity to discuss management practices with a professional forest manager, which can be valuable for those otherwise working in isolation.

Costs

There are significant costs involved for woodland owners, both in terms of payment for the initial certification and the annual audits and in the staff time required to produce and maintain the necessary documentation.

For this reason only a few, generally very large, woodland owners and managers (e.g. Forestry and Land Scotland, Woodland Trust) are certified directly; most forest owners (including some large community woodlands) obtain certification via membership of group schemes run by forest management companies which help spread the costs.

The certification process

For community woodland groups considering certification the first step would be to read the current version of UKWAS to understand whether you do or could meet the required standard. In practice most community woodland groups are likely to already meet most if not all the criteria, however there may be significant work involved to adequately document and demonstrate compliance.

Your woodland management plan or Long Term Forest Plan will be a key document to evidence your compliance with many of the certification criteria.

CWA info notes 5 & 6 describe the process of developing woodland management plans and Long Term Forest Plans respectively.
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It is possible to get quotes directly from the certification bodies, who will tender for certification using the FSC or PEFC label, but it will almost certainly be cheaper to join a group scheme run by a forest management company.

Your chosen company will carry out an initial audit and identify any work needed to get your paperwork and management systems in order to achieve the initial certification. Once certified you can use the relevant FSC or PEFC logo on your products and unprocessed timber can be sold into the trade as FSC or PEFC 100%.

An annual surveillance audit will be carried out to ensure continuing compliance with the

standard, and you may need to submit additional evidence to address any shortcomings. Each year you will need to complete an annual report listing harvesting, re-stocking, deer cull, changes in forest area and a summary of other monitoring against objectives.

Minor non-compliance with the standard will require addressing within a year. Major non-compliance must be addressed within a shorter time frame and could result in suspension of certification. If major non-compliance is not picked up by the group scheme and then found by an SGS or SA audit, the group scheme could be at risk of losing its certification.

Other labelling and certification schemes
[Scottish Working Woods](#) is a label developed by a consortium of Scottish membership organisations to endorse forest products that utilise at least 90% material from sustainably managed Scottish forests.

A variety of organisations are certified to [ISO](#) (International Organisation for Standardisation) standards. The ISO 14000 series covers environmental management systems; waste reduction sustainable resource use, etc. It is not specific to the forest industry.

Future developments

It is widely recognised that the costs of certification are prohibitive for small woodland owners/management, and that to increase certification uptake a lighter touch process must be developed.

The Forest Stewardship Council has convened [a standards development group](#) (including CWA) to actively explore options to develop more appropriate standards for small and low-intensity management woodlands: if successful this could make certification for community and other small scale woodland owners and managers much more affordable.

Resources

Community Woodlands Association (advice and support for community woodlands)

<http://www.communitywoods.org>

Making Local Woods Work (advice, tools and resources for woodland social enterprises)

<https://makinglocalwoodswork.org>

UK Forestry Standard

<https://forestry.gov.scot/publications/sustainable-forestry/uk-forestry-standard-ukfs>

UK Woodland Assurance Standard

<http://ukwas.org.uk/>

PEFC

<https://www.pefc.org/>

Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)

<https://www.fsc-uk.org/en-uk>

<https://www.fsc-uk.org/en-uk/business-area/certification-bodies>

Scottish Working Woods

<http://www.scottishworkingwoods.org.uk/>

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