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WWF statement on the PEFC international standards launched in November 2010

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WWF sees credible certification as an important tool to improve forest management globally. In collaboration with the World Bank, WWF developed the Forest Certification Assessment Guide¹ (FCAG), a methodology to assess the credibility of certification schemes. The requirements in the FCAG are deemed necessary for a certification scheme to verify responsible forest management in terms of nature conservation, social benefits and economic viability.

In 2008, WWF commissioned an assessment of the two international forest certification systems: the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Programme for Endorsement of Certification Schemes (PEFC). That assessment² showed that FSC surpassed PEFC in meeting WWF's key requirements as outlined in the FCAG, such as transparency in certification and accreditation decisions, effective stakeholder consultation in certification decisions and the balanced participation of key stakeholder groups in governance and standard setting at all levels.

In November 2010, the PEFC endorsed several new international standards that apply to national PEFC-endorsed schemes and certificate holders. The new international standards for forest management will come into effect in May 2011, and PEFC national schemes will need to demonstrate compliance no later than May 2013. In light of these changes, WWF commissioned a new FCAG assessment of the revised PEFC standards.

The new assessment³ shows that the PEFC system has been substantially modified; in particular, PEFC now has its own international standard for forest management that forms the basis for national certification schemes under the PEFC umbrella. The PEFC system is now more aligned with the FCAG, and it allows for greater consistency among national schemes (subject to the phase-in over 2 years).

Important FCAG requirements that are addressed in the revised PEFC standards include:

- forest operations shall maintain critical forest areas and other critical natural habitats affected by the operation;
- establishment of plantations shall not lead to the conversion of critical natural habitats;
- respect for indigenous people's customary rights to own, use and manage their resources; and
- effective monitoring and assessment of required management activities, and social and environmental impact assessments.

However, the assessment also found that there are still major gaps in the new PEFC standards, for example requirements for:

- balanced stakeholder participation in decision making and standard setting at international and national levels;
- transparency in the certification and accreditation decisions;
- effective stakeholder participation in certification and accreditation procedures; and
- requirements for field visits in the accreditation process for certification bodies.

As WWF highlighted in its communication with PEFC in February 2009, it is important to the organisation that credible certification systems require labelled products from mixed sources to exclude non-certified material from 'unacceptable' sources. WWF defines unacceptable⁴ sources as:

- forests known to contain or suspected of containing high conservation values, except where the forest is certified or in progress of certification under a credible program, e.g. the WWF Global Forest & Trade Network;
- forests being converted from natural forest to a plantation or other land use;
- timber illegally harvested or traded;
- timber traded in a way that drives armed conflict;
- harvesting or processing entity, or a related political or military regime, is violating human rights; and
- timber from genetically modified trees.

Both FSC and PEFC address material from non-certified sources. However, while the FSC Controlled Wood standard covers all aspects above, the new PEFC Chain of Custody standard, despite its positive changes, still doesn't require that PEFC labelled products exclude wood harvested in violation of human rights or wood harvested from areas where forest management activities may threaten high conservation values.

Considering these remaining differences, WWF will continue to focus its efforts on improving the FSC system, on adapting FSC certification to different scales and national contexts, and on promoting the FSC logo as an internationally recognized hallmark of responsible forest management.

*For more information contact Margareta Renstrom, Forest Certification Manager,
WWF International (margareta.renstrom@wwf.se)*

¹ <http://assets.panda.org/downloads/fcagfinal.pdf>

² http://assets.panda.org/downloads/2008_11_17_final_fcag_assessment.pdf

³ http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/footprint/forestry/certification/which_system/

⁴ WWF GFTN Guide to Legal and Responsible Sourcing, <http://gftn.panda.org/>