

“Open Space” Break-out session – Certification for Small Landowners (Laura Kenefic and Brian Hawthorne – group leaders)

1. The issue – Should small landowners be certified? If so, how?

2. Discussion

Twenty-five participants representing government researchers, state land managers, consulting foresters, university faculty, industry, cooperative extension, TIMOs, and students gathered to discuss this topic. The group decided to begin the discussion by listing the pros and cons of certification of small landowners. The pros included:

- A way of proving good stewardship
- Access to markets (possibly more of an issue in the future)
- Financial premium (doubtful)
- A vehicle for educating landowners about forest stewardship

The cons were:

- Expense (who will pay?)
- May duplicate Tree Farm or state tax programs
- Additional bureaucratic burden for landowners

Much discussion focused on the lack of financial incentive or benefit. Most participants felt that the primary benefit of certification for the small landowner at this time is non-economic (e.g., social validation), but that restrictions on markets or financial benefits in the future may become driving forces.

The group then discussed ways in which we could encourage or implement certification for small landowners. One impediment is that few landowners know or care about certification. We discussed the importance of education of landowners, non-landowners (re: benefits of well managed forests), purchasers, voters, sporting groups, children and teachers, etc. Enabling certification through a group approach was suggested, including landowner groups (cooperatives), Tree Farms, and state tax program participants. The benefits of certification for non-commodity values were discussed, as well as different approaches for certification of small landowners. These approaches included: different certification standards (such as SLIMF, FSC’s Family Forests Program, or something even more streamlined), using certified foresters, or certifying wood products at the time of harvest. Tenure of landownership was discussed as important. We discussed at great length the potential for certifying landowners already enrolled in state tax programs, Tree Farm system, or other programs requiring forest management or stewardship plans. Participants concurred that the primary barrier to certification of small ownerships is cost: Who will pay for the certification and subsequent audits? Suggestions included cost-sharing (i.e. state or federal contribution) or different tax rates. It was recognized that there must be a demand for certified wood products in order for certification to become attractive to small landowners. FSC’s credit system for pulpwood was suggested as an example of a force driving demand for certified wood.

3. Conclusion/Findings

Though much discussion was generated, clear direction did not emerge. One participant recounted his experience regarding certification of small landowners and emphasized the fact that they are not willing, at this time, to pay anything. It is not clear how this problem can be surmounted in the current environment, in which there is rarely a financial incentive for certification. The potential for development of restricted markets (certified wood only) or a market-driven premium would facilitate certification for the family forest. Absent this, it will require funding from outside (likely public) sources to certify small landowners who are already managing their forests sustainably (this is being investigated in Massachusetts).