

## THE SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY INITIATIVE FROM THE AIR AND ON THE GROUND

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) was created by an industry group, the American Forest and Paper Association, due to pressure created by increasing interest of consumers in the environmental risks associated with timber cutting. In order to get a “green stamp of approval” a board made up largely of industry representatives established “sustainable” harvest standards and a mechanism for inspection. Any company that meets the standards and passes the inspections becomes a SFI Certified company.

Of course any certification program is only as good as its standards and the enforcement of those standards. The industry created SFI program fails the test on both counts.

For example, while the University of Tennessee School of Forestry and the Tennessee Division of Forestry recommends clearcuts no larger than 40-50 acres, SFI standards allow clearcuts of 120 acres. Any number of these 120 acre cuts can be adjacent to each other separated by just a small buffer of trees. The result is SFI certified clearcuts of thousands of acres.

Perhaps most damaging to both the economy and forest health in Tennessee is SFI’s refusal to prohibit the conversion of native hardwood forests to monoculture pine plantations. By supporting the planting of pine plantations, SFI certification has, in effect, allowed the loss of thousands of acres of Tennessee’s diverse hardwood forests and the rapid spread of insects in epidemic proportions that prey on both native and planted pines.

Sixteen of the twenty largest forest products companies are SFI companies and are responsible for the harvest of over 5 million acres of southern forest each year. The photos below show examples of harvests done either for or by just four SFI companies—International Paper, Bowater, Mead, and J.M. Huber Co.. Multiply the practices shown below by perhaps a million to determine if SFI standards are what you want to practice on your land or if you even want to buy wood that comes from SFI certified companies.



**Figure 1** shows just a small portion of the thousands of clearcut acres on the Cumberland Plateau. This cut is on Bowater (a.k.a. Hiawasse Land Co.) land. From the air, much of the Plateau today is a mosaic of clearcuts, dead pines killed by the pine beetle, and very immature pine plantations too young to be attacked by the beetle. While these cuts exceed SFI’s maximum clearcut acreage recommendation, SFI standards nearly guarantee that these mammoth cuts will periodically be required when populations of pests like the pine beetle mushroom in the monoculture plantations allowed under SFI standards. Cuts like the one shown above nearly eliminate all wildlife and game and, in addition, ruins the soil by exposing it to the baking sun which kills the organisms responsible for soil health and fertility.



**Figure 2** shows an example of this mosaic on land that was cut to supply several SFI companies before the plantation was killed by pine beetles. The brown trees are dead pines, the gray trees are dormant native hardwoods, and the green trees are planted pines that are too young to be killed by the beetle. Also, very steep slopes have been cut in this area allowing soil to erode. SFI standards require companies to follow state Best Management Practices (BMPs). Unfortunately, Tennessee’s BMPs have no rules about cutting on steep slopes with erosion prone soils.

Tennessee does, however, have BMPs that recommend leaving a buffer of trees on the banks of streams. **Figure 3** shows a hardwood cut on the Plateau where the logger left a buffer on part of the streams, but completely denuded the banks of the stream headwaters. The hardwood trees from this site were purchased by several SFI companies as “gatewood”. SFI’s 2002 Annual Report commends SFI company mills that purchase trees from “trained loggers” but admits that it is not easy for companies to “..develop an auditable system of tracking all the wood that comes into their mills.” In Tennessee, the “Master Logger Program” consists of only four days of training with only one day dedicated to forest practices. Consequently, SFI companies can sell their products with the SFI “green stamp of approval” while the wood that goes into the products is harvested from sites like the ones shown in this report.



**Figure 4** shows the International Paper (SFI certified) chip mill in Caryville, Tennessee. This mill chips only hardwoods at the rate of about 7,000 acres a year. Despite the fact that IP until recently owned 85,000 acres of hardwoods near the mill, less than 10% of the supply comes from IP land. Now that IP has sold this land (a new trend among the wood using industries), all the trees chipped by IP will come from other suppliers—none of which need to be certified under SFI standards.



Before this hardwood forest was cut and sold to a SFI company mill, the muddy channel shown in **Figure 5** was a clear running stream bordered by lush ferns and large trees. Not only was all the vegetation removed from the banks, the banks themselves were destroyed by equipment. This disturbance and the resultant major sedimentation will kill all but the hardiest life forms in and around the stream. Although this pollution is against State and Federal law, nothing prevented the SFI companies from buying the trees removed from this site.

Despite the fact that SFI certification by no means guarantees that good forest management will be practiced, the Tennessee Division of Forestry and politicians are bestowing credibility on the program by heralding the virtues of SFI and certifying all State Forests in Tennessee.

Governor Don Sundquist stated that:

"By demonstrating certification on our state forests, we can provide options for thousands of private forest land owners who are the most critical component of the forest landscape in Tennessee," the governor said. "Forest certification serves as a viable and preferable alternative to sometimes costly, unnecessary and burdensome regulation." (Chattanooga Times 1/29/02)

In the same article, Commissioner Wheeler of the Tennessee Department of Agriculture said:

"Demonstrating certification on our public forestlands will show landowners that guidelines can be voluntarily applied to assure forest sustainability while providing an economic incentive."

In reality this is a hollow public relations gesture since TDF already practices relatively good management, has a staff of experts to supervise harvests, and cuts very little of the State Forests each year. TDF, a division of the Department of Agriculture, does promote the harvesting of the State's forests, but unlike the pulp and paper companies, manages its own forests with small cuts on a 100 year rotation without conversion to pine plantations. Furthermore, unlike corporations, TDF is not dependent on income from timber harvests to increase revenues and stock values.

TDF and industrial forest companies seem committed to promoting industry created certification as the "cure all" for Tennessee's forest ills. They want to continue the same old logging practices without any legal restrictions that could prevent the environmental damage illustrated in the pictures above. Some politicians, believing that certification is a substitute for legislation, are trying to exempt certified companies from even the most modest of legislation designed to regulate the industry. For example, a bill before the 2002 legislature would have simply required any company that wanted to build a large mill and receive state funded economic incentives to make sure there were enough trees in an area to support the new mill as well as existing mills. At the last minute, an amendment was proposed to exempt certified companies. The senate sponsor of the bill decided not to bring the bill up for a vote because the amendment rendered the bill ineffectual since nearly all the corporations capable of building large mills are certified.

As Hank Cauley, Executive Director of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) - U.S. said in the Knoxville News Sentinel:

"FSC certification should complement strong environmental laws; in fact FSC certification requires that such laws are obeyed."

Judging by our observations, we\* agree with Mr. Cauley.

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