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FOREST, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND THE FOREST STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL®

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC®) applauds the global community of governments for the Paris Agreement, which recognizes the need for an “effective and progressive response to the urgent threat of climate change” to keep global temperature rise this century well below 2°C, and to drive efforts to limit it to 1.5°C. We also applaud the Agreement’s recognition of the importance of the integrity of all ecosystems and the protection of biodiversity.

The Agreement highlights the importance of forests in responding to climate change, calling on all countries to conserve and enhance reservoirs and sinks of carbon in forests. It also confirms a framework of results-based payments for developing countries that implement activities to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and promote the role of conservation and sustainable management of forests.

FSC is an important global partner in realizing the ambition of protecting and using forests as an effective climate solution.

Forests and climate change – the big picture

Forests play an essential role in climate regulation. Together with oceans, forests are the key ecosystems the planet uses to remove carbon dioxide (CO₂) – the most important greenhouse gas – from the atmosphere. Carbon is stored in both trees and forest soils, and the world’s forests contain roughly as much carbon as our atmosphere¹.

All ecosystems that play a role in mitigating climate change have come under stress from human activities, but the impact on the capacity of forests to store carbon has been particularly extreme. Since 1750, the world has lost nearly a third of its forests. Where forest cover still exists, its quality in terms of carbon capture and biodiversity has decreased in many parts of the world.

Halting deforestation and forest degradation are necessary elements of a successful global agenda to prevent the planet passing the 2°C temperature increase scientists have set as the turning point for dangerous climate change.

Maintaining forest cover, and ensuring its quality through sustainable forest management, both belong on an effective climate change mitigation agenda. Sustainable forest management can maintain, or restore, the carbon sequestration function of a forest, and is essential for safeguarding the forests that remain.

¹ WBCSD [2012] Facts & Trends: Forests, Forest Products, Carbon and Energy. World Business Council for Sustainable Development, Geneva. (Also available at <http://www.wbcsd.org/Pages/EDocument/EDocumentDetails.aspx?ID=14964>, accessed 11 November 2015).

FSC and climate change

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC®) regards climate change as a very serious threat to global humanity. Climate change undermines the natural ecosystems on which we rely for our basic needs – food, health, and shelter – and many of the products that support our livelihoods and economies. Today, climate change is damaging ecosystems at an unprecedented rate, but these same ecosystems are also our strongest allies in mitigating future climate change.

With its certification scheme for forest management, its chain of custody control standard, and its outreach to consumers with its labels, FSC contributes to mitigating climate change by promoting sustainable forest management, and by promoting the recycling of wood materials. Our new global framework for forest management standards, approved in early 2015, gives special attention to protecting the function of forests as netremovers of CO₂ from the atmosphere. FSC has also started developing new tools for rewarding the preservation of valuable ecosystem services, including carbon storage, in responsibly managed forests.

Risks of increased pressure on forests

In coming years, demand for forest products will increase substantially, partly due to climate-inspired policies. In the construction sector, wood's relatively low energy footprint is making it an increasingly widely-used building material. And it is favoured, for example, in many green public and private procurement policies. Additionally, biomass is increasingly replacing fossil fuels and cotton in textiles and chemical products.

But the biggest impact on forests may come from policies in the energy sector, where the promotion of bio-energy as an alternative to fossil fuels is partly based on forest resources. Biomass currently provides nine per cent of global primary energy supply, mostly in the form of firewood and charcoal. This proportion is expected to grow fast, and will play a considerable role in replacing fossil fuels for electricity and heat production. While some biomass will come from agriculture and waste, these sources are limited, and in agriculture there is competition with food and fibre production.

These shifts towards using wood as a renewable and sustainable source of materials and energy are positive. However, if not followed by strong action to secure sustainable forest management, they also bring with them risks of increased deforestation, forest degradation, and failure to reduce carbon emissions from energy production.

The increased pressures on forests implied by climate policies make it even more important that these same policies incorporate the protection and sustainable management of forests.

Tackling climate change with sustainable forest management

Sustainable forest management is an approach that aims to prevent degradation of forest quality by seeking the right balance between harvesting forest resources for human use and the need for the natural cycles to remain intact. Sustainable forest management processes succeed when they include social guarantees and incentives for forest communities and for forestry workers.

Two decades of certifying sustainable forest management

In the last 20 years, FSC certification has become a globally recognized tool for promoting sustainable forest management. Its widespread international success rests on more than two decades of work with foresters, the processing industry, and environmental and social organizations. In 2015, some 185 million hectares of natural, semi-natural and plantation forests – in 80 countries – are FSC certified. We estimate² that these forests produce almost 17 per cent of all industrial roundwood harvested in the world.

Mobilization of market actors – both retailers and consumers – has also been an important part of FSC's success. Companies, public procurers, and individual consumers are interested in products from sustainably managed forests, and express their preference for products made using FSC materials. FSC's chain of custody certification ensures that these materials are identified and tracked from the forest to the consumer, either as 100% pure, or mixed in a verified and transparent way with controlled or recycled materials.

FSC is recognized for its unique governance system, where environmental, social, and economic actors work together in a balanced multi-stakeholder system to agree how we define responsible forest management and control products from it. Our credibility and transparency is maintained by third-party certification bodies – accredited by a specialized international accreditation organisation – which grant FSC forest management and chain of custody certificates, control and monitor performance, demand corrective actions where necessary, and withdraw certificates when companies no longer comply with certification requirements.

FSC is at the cutting edge of adapting sustainable forest management certification in an era of climate change. We recognize that carbon capture and storage is an important component of forest ecosystem services – one that is paradoxically both central to climate stability, and threatened by increased demands for 'carbon-neutral' bio-energy. From 2015, our revised forest management standards include the maintenance, conservation, or restoration of carbon sequestration and storage. We are now developing new tools that will show businesses and investors that these natural benefits are being preserved and will reward participating FSC certificate holders for doing so.

This makes FSC certification not only a reliable tool for promoting sustainable forest management, but also a step towards the sustainable production of bio-energy that will help minimize greenhouse gas emissions.

² FSC [2015] *Global Volume of FSC Wood Produced Annually*. Forest Stewardship Council, Bonn. (Also available at <https://ic.fsc.org/market-news.332.1234.htm>, accessed 11 November 2015).





What does FSC expect from governments, businesses, and civil society organizations?

- Ambitious greenhouse gas emission reduction pledges ('nationally determined contributions') that will collectively limit temperature increases to 1.5°C
- Forest sector and land use policies that conserve and enhance reservoirs and sinks of carbon.
- Effective integrated landscape-level policies, including initiatives to stop deforestation, and pursue reforestation and forest restoration.
- Climate change policies that promote energy efficiency and efficient material use, including the cascaded use of forest resources (i.e. producing material products first and energy at the end of the life-cycle).
- Strict, enforceable requirements for the use of biomass for energy production that lead to a genuine, quantified reduction of greenhouse gas emissions compared to fossil fuel use, and prevent negative impacts on biodiversity.
- Active support for actions to stop deforestation and forest degradation, as well as for promoting sustainable forest management worldwide.
- Active support for actions to maintain forest biodiversity and to take forest ecosystem services into account in public policies and market mechanisms.
- Active support for the fundamental role of local communities and Indigenous Peoples in sustainable forest management, in adapting to existing consequences of climate change, and in mitigating future climate change.
- Actively promote the role of credible wood product certification schemes in protecting carbon sequestration and storage, and in forest and biodiversity conservation.
- Give specific preference to FSC-certified wood-based products and materials in public procurement policies and practices.

What can FSC offer?

- An effective tool for enhancing the sustainable management of forests, and an assurance system that can give confidence to governments, donors, and the private sector.
- A convening role for discussing and finding solutions to the problems facing the world's forests, such as the degradation of remaining intact forests.
- National assessments of risk related to forest legality; forest conversion; Indigenous, traditional and civil rights; high conservation values; and genetically modified organisms.
- New tools to evaluate the impact of forest stewardship on ecosystem services, including carbon sequestration and storage, biodiversity conservation, watershed services, soil conservation and recreational services.