



Forest Stewardship
Council: Accept No
Substitutes

After [my post concerning paper and plastic bags](#) appeared, LegalPlanet was the recipient of a robo-comment from the [Sustainable Forestry Initiative](#), an industry-backed group that I suggested was greenwashing bad forest practices. SFI now says that it has cleaned up its act without ever acknowledging that the act was bad in the first place. (i.e. “I didn’t do it, and I’ll never do it again.”). You can look for yourself.

Why am I so skeptical of this group? Well, I first read about certification of forestry practices in Jared Diamond’s wonderful 2005 book, [Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed](#). A section of the book discusses the important work being done by the [Forest Stewardship Council](#), which accredits third-party certification organizations, who determine whether loggers are practicing sustainable forestry. Diamond is no tree-hugger: he has been accused of favoring industry *too* much. In the section (pp. 478-79), Diamond also discusses SFI:

The effectiveness of the Forest Stewardship Council has received the ultimate compliment from logging companies opposed to it: they have set up their own competing certification organizations with weaker standards. These include the Sustainable Forestry Initiative in the U.S., set up by the American Forestry and Paper Association; the Canadian Standards Association; and the Pan-European Forest Council. The effect (and presumably the purpose) is to confuse the public with competing claims: for instance, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative originally proposed six different labels making six different claims. All off these ‘knockoffs’ differ from the FSC in that they do not require independent third-party certification, but they permit companies to certify themselves (I’m not joking). They do not ask companies to judge themselves by uniform standards and quantifiable results, (e.g., ‘width of the strips of riparian flanking vegetation flanking streams’), but instead by unquantifiable processes (‘we have a policy,’ ‘our managers participate in discussions’). They lack chain-of-custody certification, so that any product of a sawmill that receives both certified and uncertified timber becomes certified. The Pan-European Forest Council practices automatic regional certification, by which for instance the entire

country of Austria became certified quickly. It remains to be seen whether, in the future, these competing industry attempts at self-certification will be outcompeted by the FSC through losing credibility in the eyes of consumers, or will instead converge on FSC standards in order to gain credibility.

Diamond neglected to mention one other possibility: “or will successfully fool consumers into accepting their labels.”

Now it must be said *Collapse* is six years old, and since then, SFI has removed some of the more obviously egregious practices, some of which Diamond named. SFI now has third-party certification, and is an independent nonprofit. It also has a chain-of-custody program. But at this stage, it is unclear at best whether these new programs are truly better or just more sophisticated next-generation methods of greenwashing. The burden of persuasion is on SFI to prove to the public that it has cleaned up its act (and no, a flashy website doesn't count). Certainly their materials don't seem to have internalized the idea that they have committed egregious greenwashing. If anything, they keep using the idea that they are just trying to avoid an FSC “monopoly,” which is somewhat disingenuous: the point is to have a single standard so that consumers can make informed choices. There seem to be only two reasons to go outside the original organization: 1) because that organization has behaved unfairly; or 2) in order to confuse consumers. Even SFI does not argue the first. That leaves the second. You do the math.

It is also disquieting — although hardly dispositive — that on [SFI's flashy webpage touting all the nice things that people say about them](#), there is not a single environmental, social, or indigenous peoples' group there. It's obviously not the best strategy to outsource your judgment, but when even mainstream groups like the World Wildlife Fund and the League of Conservation Voters aren't endorsing you, that should say something. The Sierra Club, for what it's worth, has already filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission about what it says are SFI's deceptive practices.

I will be taking a closer look at comparative standards and track records over the next few weeks, and report what I find. In the meantime, accept no substitutes, and make sure that any wood or paper you buy comes with an FSC label.