



Accept No Substitutes

A few weeks ago, [I argued that](#) only wood and paper certified by the Forest Stewardship Council really should be called a sustainable product. Much to my surprise, the post got a robo-comment from the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, the paper industry's group, claiming that it, too, was a legitimate certification organization. Given SFI's pretty shameful track record, [I was skeptical, but promised to follow up](#) with more detail on the contrasting standards and policies of both organizations.

Well, here's a first installment, and SFI still isn't looking too good. Let's do a quick comparison of general principles — a category that stands to favor SFI because it does not require the sort of detailed, scientifically-based practices that more precise standards would demand. What we find is a rather slippery use of language on SFI's part.

Consider the idea of preserving biological diversity, which lies at the heart of any sustainable forestry program. The Forest Stewardship Council's Principle #6 demands that

Forest management shall conserve biological diversity and its associated values, water resources, soils, and unique and fragile ecosystems and landscapes, and, by so doing, maintain the ecological functions and the integrity of the forest.

We can contrast this with SFI's Objective 4, "*Conservation of Biological Diversity including Forests with Exceptional Conservation Value.*" This Objective and Performance Measure 4.1 require that forests "have programs to promote *biological diversity* at *stand-* and *landscape-levels.*"

The first thing that jumps out about this is that FSC's policies insist on results, and SFI's merely insist on an unidentified process. FSC wants forests to "conserve biological diversity" while SFI only wants programs that promote it, "promotion" being wholly undefined (unlike, as I note below, most other SFI words).

Another example is found in FSC Criterion 6.3, which mandates that

Ecological functions and values shall be maintained intact, enhanced, or restored, including: a) Forest regeneration and succession; b) Genetic, species, and ecosystem diversity c) Natural cycles that affect the productivity of the forest

ecosystem.

Nothing like this exists anywhere in SFI's Policies.

You might also wonder why, when quoting SFI's policies, I include so many italicized words. The answer is that SFI does so: its policies are shot through with such italicizations because they are defined terms. One cannot read any of SFI's policies without flipping back and forth to the glossary. SFI has obviously hired some pretty fancy attorneys for them to establish slippery standards.

There are other big differences that come up. For example, while FSC has strong protections for the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, and labor, SFI merely says that they should be consulted. And even though both the United States and Canada are signatories to various international treaties such as CITES and the Convention on Biological Diversity, compliance with such treaties is nowhere required by SFI.

And remember: this is at the level of general policy. Once you get to details, more bad news ~~will~~ could emerge. Of course, the mere fact that FSC might have better policies on paper does not mean that it actually enforces them in practice. Maybe SFI does so better. But given how vague SFI's own policies are, no one should be fooled.

The bottom line is that the bottom line has not changed, at least for now: if you want sustainable wood and forest products, only the FSC label will do.