



The Conservation Fund

2021 SFI® Forest Management Public Summary Audit Report

Introduction

The SFI Program of The Conservation Fund of Chapel Hill, North Carolina has demonstrated conformance with the SFI 2015-2019 Standard and Rules, Section 2 – Forest Management Standard, according to the NSF Certification Process.

NSF International initially certified The Conservation Fund on July 1, 2007, and recertified the program in 2012 and in 2015, when organization was re-certified to the new SFI 2015-2019 Forest Management Standard requirements. In 2017 the audit was designed to review all of the requirements in order to recertify the program and align it with another certification. This report describes the 2021 Surveillance Audit designed to review the operation of their program against a sample of SFI 2015-2019 Standard and Rules, Section 2 – Forest Management Standard requirements. The audit team also reviewed changes in the standard, changes in operations, the management review system, and efforts at continuous improvement, all of which were subject to detailed review. The audit included a review of lands in Minnesota, Alabama, Georgia, and North Coast California properties, comprising 3 of the 47 named properties making up the program.

Program Background

The Conservation Fund's certified land base includes most portions of its Working Forest Fund, excluding lands slated for sale over the short term. All of the forestlands will have working forest conservation easements to ensure long-term forest management and conservation, or will be sold in fee to State, Federal or other conservation partners committed to the management of working forestland. The Forest Management General Strategy is described in the Working Forest Fund Policy Digest:

the following strategic goals will be consistent across every Working Forest Fund project:

- 1) Create a sustainable forestry project that is economically self-supporting and contributes to the state and local economy; while respecting all workers, members of the community, and indigenous people;
- 2) Perpetuate a healthy and productive forest by maintaining vegetative and structural diversity, supporting ecological resilience, and liming the introduction and spread of invasive and exotic plant species;
- 3) Maintain water quality and protect the riparian and aquatic ecosystems supported by healthy, intact forestland;
- 4) Provide a sustainable source of forest products as is consistent with the long-term conservation of the property;
- 5) Enhance the wildlife habitat value of the forest by providing a range of successional stages across the landscape;
- 6) Promote timber harvesting practices that are aesthetically compatible with the local landscape;
- 7) Contribute to the local economy through forest jobs, forest products, and compatible outdoor recreation opportunities
- 8) Implement land management strategies that will result in the Property being eligible for forest certification by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and/or the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI).

The program's North Coast Forest Conservation Program in California includes 73,613 acres of working forestland in five major tracts located in the coastal portion of Mendocino and Sonoma Counties, California. These forests support second and third growth stands of coastal redwood, Douglas-fir, pine, and related species, with some areas of oak prairie and pygmy cypress trees. The forests are generally well-roaded, blocked in, and provide an opportunity for demonstrating the conservation of aquatic and upland resources in a working-forest context.

The management objectives are summarized in this paragraph from one representative Timber Harvest Plan:

Objectives: *The long-term objective is to maintain the ownership as a working forest while harvesting less than growth in order to increase timber stocks and average tree size across the landscape. TCF strives to use uneven aged regeneration methods that promote and maintain structural and compositional forest diversity and provide habitat for a variety of terrestrial and aquatic species while still allowing for sustainable timber harvest. Individual tree and group selection harvests as well as tanoak reduction treatments will be used to restore conifer site occupancy by providing growing space for new conifer age classes and vigorous established conifers. TCF will continue long-term investments in the road infrastructure in order to reduce the potential for sediment delivery.*

Source: Timber Harvest Plan summary, Wet Hazel THP, Salmon Creek Forest

Beyond California, the certified portions of the Working Forest Fund and other certified parcels consist of properties totaling 324,877 acres in Alabama, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Vermont, West Virginia, and Tennessee.

The Conservation Fund's SFI Program is managed by Brian Schneider, Forest Operations Manager and Jenna Schreiber, Forest Operations Manager.



The audit was performed by NSF in September, and October 2021 by an audit team headed by Tucker Watts, SFI Lead Auditor, and Michelle Matteo, FSC Lead Auditor. Audit team members fulfill the qualification criteria for conducting audits contained in SFI 2015-2019 Standards and Rules, Section 9 - Procedures and Auditor Qualifications and Accreditation.

The objective of the audit was to assess conformance of the organization’s SFI Program to the requirements of the SFI 2015-2019 Standard and Rules, Section 2 – Forest Management.

The scope of the audit included forest management operations. Forest practices that were the focus of field inspections included those that have been under active management over the planning period of the past 3 years. In addition, practices conducted earlier were also reviewed as appropriate (regeneration and BMP issues, for example), SFI obligations to promote sustainable forestry practices, to seek legal compliance, and to incorporate continual improvement systems were also within the scope of the audit.

The SFI Standard was used without modifying any requirements. The following indicators are not applicable:

| Number | Requirement | Reason |
|--------------|---|---|
| 2.1.3 | Plantings of exotic tree species should minimize risk to native ecosystems. | No exotic tree species are planted. |
| 2.1.5 | Afforestation programs that consider potential ecological impacts of the selection and planting of tree species in non-forested landscapes. | There is no tree planting in non-forested landscapes. |
| 8.2 | Program Participants with forest management responsibilities on public lands shall confer with affected Indigenous Peoples with respect to sustainable forest management practices. | The Conservation Fund does not have forest management responsibilities on public lands. |
| 10.1.2 | Research on genetically engineered trees via forest tree biotechnology shall adhere to all applicable federal, state, and provincial regulations and international protocols ratified by the United States and/or Canada depending on jurisdiction of management. | The Conservation Fund is not engaged in research addressing genetic engineering of trees. |
| 11.2.3 | Participation in or support of SFI Implementation Committees to establish criteria for recognition of logger certification programs, where they exist | The Conservation Fund does not participate in an SFI Implementation Committees in states where there is a logger certification program. |
| Objective 13 | To participate and implement sustainable forest management on public lands. | The Conservation Fund does not have management responsibilities for public lands. |

Audit Process

NSF initiated the audit process with a series of planning phone calls to confirm the scope of the audit, review the SFI Indicators and evidence to be used to assess conformance, verify that the Company was prepared to proceed to the Surveillance Audit, and to prepare a detailed audit plan. NSF then conducted the Surveillance Audit of conformance to the SFI 2015-2019 Standards and Rules®, Section 2. A report was prepared, and final approval was done by an independent Certification Board member assigned by NSF. Follow-up or Surveillance Audits are required by SFI, Section 9. The next Surveillance Audit is scheduled for the fall of 2021.

The audit was governed by a detailed audit plan designed to enable the audit team to efficiently determine conformance with the applicable requirements. The plan provided for the assembly and review of audit evidence consisting of documents, interviews, and on-site inspections of ongoing or completed forest practices.

During the audit NSF reviewed a sample of the written documentation assembled to provide objective evidence of Conformance. NSF also selected field sites for inspection based upon the risk of environmental impact, likelihood of occurrence, special features, and other criteria outlined in the NSF protocols. NSF also selected and interviewed stakeholders such as contract loggers, landowners and other interested parties, and interviewed employees within the organization to confirm that the SFI Standard was understood and actively implemented.

The possible findings of the audit included Full Conformance, Major Non-conformance, Minor Non-conformance, Opportunities for Improvement, and Practices that exceeded the Basic Requirements of the standard.



Overview of Audit Findings

NSF found conformance with each indicator reviewed on the Minnesota, Alabama, Georgia, and North Coast California properties visited and determined that there were no non-conformances. As such, the Conservation Fund was found to be in overall conformance and the program was recommended for continued conformance to the SFI 2015-2019 Forest Management Standard. The next audit will be a recertification and is scheduled to take place in September 2022.

General Description of Evidence of Conformity

NSF's audit team used a variety of evidence to determine conformance. A general description of this evidence is provided below, organized by SFI Objective.

Objective 1 Forest Management Planning

To ensure forest management plans include long-term sustainable harvest levels and measures to avoid forest conversion.

Summary of Evidence: Not audited in 2021.

Objective 2 Forest Health and Productivity

To ensure long-term forest productivity, carbon storage and conservation of forest resources through prompt reforestation, afforestation, minimized chemical use, soil conservation, and protecting forests from damaging agents.

Summary of Evidence: Field observations and associated records were used to confirm practices. The Conservation Fund has programs for reforestation, for protection against insects, disease, and wildfire, and for careful management of activities which could potentially impact soil and long-term productivity. Experienced professional foresters oversee all aspects of forest management.

Objective 3 Protection and Maintenance of Water Resources

To protect the water quality of rivers, streams, lakes, wetlands and other water bodies through meeting or exceeding best management practices.

Summary of Evidence: Not audited in 2021.

Objective 4 Conservation of Biological Diversity

To manage the quality and distribution of wildlife habitats and contribute to the conservation of biological diversity by developing and implementing stand- and landscape-level measures that promote a diversity of types of habitat and successional stages, and the conservation of forest plants and animals, including aquatic species, as well as threatened and endangered species, Forests with Exceptional Conservation Value, old-growth forests and ecologically important sites.

Summary of Evidence: Not audited in 2021.

Objective 5 Management of Visual Quality and Recreational Benefits

To manage the visual impact of forest operations and provide recreational opportunities for the public.

Summary of Evidence: Field observations of completed operations and policies/procedures for visual quality were assessed during the evaluation. Maps of recreation sites, combined with field visits and interviews, confirmed a strong recreation program.

Objective 6 Protection of Special Sites

To manage lands that are geologically or culturally important in a manner that takes into account their unique qualities.

Summary of Evidence: Not audited in 2021.

Objective 7 Efficient Use of Fiber Resources

To minimize waste and ensure the efficient use of fiber resources.

Summary of Evidence: Field observations of completed operations, contract clauses, and discussions with staff and field service providers provided the key evidence.

Objective 8 Recognize and Respect Indigenous Peoples' Rights

To recognize and respect Indigenous Peoples' rights and traditional knowledge.

Summary of Evidence: Not audited in 2021.



Objective 9 Legal and Regulatory Compliance

To comply with applicable federal, provincial, state and local laws and regulations.

Summary of Evidence: Not audited in 2021.

Objective 10 Forestry Research, Science and Technology

To invest in forestry research, science and technology, upon which sustainable forest management decisions are based and broaden the awareness of climate change impacts on forests, wildlife and biological diversity.

Summary of Evidence: In-kind support of research was confirmed by review of documents and by interviews.

Objective 11 Training and Education

To improve the implementation of sustainable forestry practices through appropriate training and education programs.

Summary of Evidence: Training records of personnel, records associated with harvest sites audited, and review of state training database provided confirmation of participation in training programs.

Objective 12 Community Involvement and Landowner Outreach

To broaden the practice of sustainable forestry through public outreach, education, and involvement, and to support the efforts of SFI Implementation Committees.

Summary of Evidence: Outreach reports, agendas for meetings, and selected summaries of comments were sufficient to assess the requirements.

Objective 13 Public Land Management Responsibilities

To participate and implement sustainable forest management on public lands.

Summary of Evidence: N.A. The Conservation Fund does not have management responsibilities for public lands.

Objective 14 Communications and Public Reporting

To increase transparency and to annually report progress on conformance with the SFI Forest Management Standard.

Summary of Evidence: Reports filed with SFI Inc. and the SFI Inc. website provided the key evidence.

Objective 15 Management Review and Continual Improvement

To promote continual improvement in the practice of sustainable forestry by conducting a management review and monitoring performance.

Summary of Evidence: Records of program reviews, agendas and notes from management review meetings, and interviews with personnel involved in management review were assessed.

Relevance of Forestry Certification

Third-party certification provides assurance that forests are being managed under the principles of sustainable forestry, which are described in the Sustainable Forestry Initiative Standard as:

1. Sustainable Forestry

To practice *sustainable forestry* to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs by practicing a land stewardship ethic that integrates *reforestation* and the managing, growing, nurturing and harvesting of trees for useful products and *ecosystem services* such as the *conservation* of soil, air and water quality, carbon, *biological diversity*, *wildlife* and *aquatic habitats*, recreation and aesthetics.

2. Forest Productivity and Health

To provide for regeneration after harvest and maintain the productive capacity of the forest land base, and to protect and maintain *long-term* forest and soil *productivity*. In addition, to protect forests from economically or environmentally undesirable levels of wildfire, pests, diseases, *invasive exotic plants and animals* and other damaging agents and thus maintain and improve *long-term* forest health and *productivity*.

3. Protection of Water Resources

To protect water bodies and *riparian areas* and to conform with forestry *best management practices* to protect water quality.



4. Protection of Biological Diversity

To manage forests in ways that protect and promote *biological diversity*, including animal and plant species, *wildlife habitats*, and ecological or natural community types.

5. Aesthetics and Recreation

To manage the visual impacts of forest operations, and to provide recreational opportunities for the public.

6. Protection of Special Sites

To manage lands that are ecologically, geologically or *culturally important* in a manner that takes into account their unique qualities.

7. Responsible Fiber Sourcing Practices in North America

To use and promote among other forest landowners' *sustainable forestry* practices that are both scientifically credible and economically, environmentally and socially responsible.

8. Legal Compliance

To comply with applicable federal, provincial, state, and local *forestry* and related environmental laws, statutes, and regulations.

9. Research

To support advances in sustainable forest management through *forestry* research, science and technology.

10. Training and Education

To improve the practice of *sustainable forestry* through training and education *programs*.

11. Community Involvement and Social Responsibility

To broaden the practice of *sustainable forestry* on all lands through community involvement, socially responsible practices, and through recognition and respect of *Indigenous Peoples'* rights and *traditional forest-related knowledge*.

12. Transparency

To broaden the understanding of forest certification to the *Fiber Sourcing* Standard by documenting certification audits and making the findings publicly available.

13. Continual Improvement

To continually improve the practice of forest management, and to monitor, measure and report performance in achieving the commitment to *sustainable forestry*.

14. Avoidance of Controversial Sources including Illegal Logging in Offshore Fiber Sourcing

Applies only to the SFI 2015-2019 Fiber Sourcing Standard

To avoid wood fiber from illegally logged forests when procuring fiber outside of North America, and to avoid sourcing fiber from countries without effective social laws.

Source: Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) Standard, 2015–2019 Edition

For Additional Information Contact

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