

SFM Network
Research Note Series
No. 38

Public participation and forest certification in Québec

Highlights

- Certification criteria promote various participation mechanisms for integrating stakeholders into forest management.
- Certification provides a framework for the implementation of public participation.
- Certification can facilitate interaction among stakeholders who use a given landbase.

The use of forests can influence people's thoughts and expectations concerning possible forest development. How can citizens make their voices heard by those responsible for the management of our forests? This note reviews the role of forest certification in providing a public forum for sharing ideas on forest management.

In Québec, public participation is an important factor in forest management. Generally, the process consists of a dialogue between local forest stakeholders and industry representatives. The latter are responsible

for forest management in Québec's public lands. The purpose of the dialogue is to reach an agreement concerning a preliminary plan for future forest management. This participation is largely governed by the *Loi sur les forêts* (Forest Act) (see Box 1). The integration of participants in the decision-making process is therefore an increasingly important obligation in forest management.

Various organisations recognize participation as an integral part of sustainable forest management. Forest certification is seen as a way of approving the quality of this management. With precise criteria for the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable forest management, certification allows a business's performance to be measured. As a rule, certification standards outline specific objectives to be achieved in the area of public participation. Presently, three forest certification standards are prevalent in Québec: the *Forest Stewardship Council* (FSC) standard, the *Sustainable Forestry Initiative* (SFI) standard, and the *Canadian Standards Association* standard (CSA/Z809).

Forest certification

Forest certification was first developed in the early 1980s in the wake of the Rio Earth Summit. With its criteria, objectives, and indicators, certification is a tool for checking achievement of the principles of sustainable forest management. It is a voluntary, transparent process to which companies adhere in hopes of gaining recognition for their forest management and practices while deriving economic benefits. During the approach to certification, a business submits its practices to independent, third-party scrutiny. Thereafter, the company receives a social license attesting to the sustainability of its forestry practices. With respect to public participation, it is recognized that certification can alter practices. But how can citizens integrate themselves into a certification process which is the responsibility of the industry?



Box 1. Legal Provisions Related to Public Participation (adapted from the *Loi sur les forêts* ; L.R.Q., Chapter F-4.1)

54. In order to be able to take into consideration the interests and concerns of other users of the land in the management unit and to prevent conflicts related to the implementation of forest management activities, the licence holder shall invite the following to take part in the preparation of the general plan: 1) regional county municipalities and, if need be, urban communities in the region whose territories overlap the management unit in question; 2) First Nations communities concerned, as represented by their band councils; 3) managers of wildlife areas; 4) any tenant occupying the land for agricultural purposes, such as maple syrup producers operating within the management unit.

The licence holder may also invite the participation of any other person or organisation in the development of the plan.

58.1. Before approving the general and five-year plans, the Minister will make them accessible to the public as information for a period of 45 days.

58.2. During the time period set out in Article 58.1, the licence holder shall carry out a consultation with the people and groups who have requested it within the first 20 days of this time period, in accordance with the procedure established by the Minister. This request must be made in writing, giving reasons and explaining the requester’s interest in the area affected by the plans.

In order to answer this question, case studies were carried out in the summer of 2004 with seven Québec forestry companies that were either certified or scheduled to be. More specifically, of the seven companies studied, two were working towards certification under the FSC standard, three had been certified under CSA/Z809, and two were certified under the SFI standard. At the time of the studies, these were all of the Québec companies who were certified or working towards certification. There are now several other businesses with or seeking forest certification and these may feature other modes of public participation.


Public participation and forest certification

Forest certification is intended to provide consumers with an objective evaluation of a company’s environmental performance. It allows buyers to make purchasing decisions based on the attributes of products, thus giving them the possibility of contributing to protection of the environment. Certification standards now in force in Québec try to balance the various aspects of forest management. The FSC standard made its appearance in 1993. Public participation and the evaluation of social impacts are integral parts of this international standard. One year later, the SFI standard, developed in the United States, was issued. This standard is mainly designed for application to privately-owned lands. It requires participation by the “forest community” (private producers, workers in silviculture, industry representatives, and forest-dependent communities) in order to achieve a sustainable forest industry. In 1996, the Canadian Standards Association launched its own standard for sustainable forest management (CSA/CANZ809). Participation is central to this standard, which demands input from representatives of the population throughout the process of certification.

In view of the diversity of social demands on our forests, forest industries must consider the numerous stakeholders in the landbase while carrying out their management activities. Therefore, they implement participatory structures in order to involve stakeholders in forest management. In this respect, certification can become an enabling tool for civic



Public consultation meeting with a tallyman.
Photo courtesy of Martin Pelletier.



dialogue among the various public groups. The certification standards require companies to establish various mechanisms for public participation.

Forest Stewardship Council

FSC principles deal with forest management as a whole. Two principles stand out in relation to public participation. Principle # 3 concerns the rights of First Nations peoples and is intended to ensure that they have their say in the management of the lands they occupy. This principle seeks, among other things, to ensure the approval of plans by the First Nations communities affected by forestry operations. Principle # 4, on the other hand, addresses community relations and the rights of forest-sector workers. The principle seeks to foster the well-being of local communities through this principle; i.e., by having them participate in the making of decisions that impact their home territory.

In practice, businesses certified in accordance with the FSC standard conform to these two principles by using four different processes. First, they use legal mechanisms to demonstrate that they respect the spirit of the standard. Second, as they work towards certification, these businesses set up information roundtables made up of stakeholders in the area. In the course of these meetings, participants share ideas on the management activities. These forums serve to raise awareness, to educate people, and to build up a synergy among the stakeholders. At the outset, these roundtables often have no decision-making power. With time, they have evolved so that participants now have more power relative to the decisions made by the forest companies. The companies also use existing integrated resource management (IRM) roundtables.

The third participation process used by these businesses is oriented specifically towards individuals and interest groups in order to formalize exchanges on subjects of common interest. Individual agreements and consultations are used to demonstrate the companies' commitment to public participation. They represent a response to the demands of stakeholders. For instance, when a stakeholder makes a request, industry people meet that stakeholder to discuss it. Interestingly, these processes are used mostly to meet people who do not take part in other participation activities such as the IRM roundtables.

Fourthly, businesses certified through the FSC must observe Principle # 3 concerning the rights of First Nations peoples. To satisfy this commitment, they use two participation methods. For certain communities, they must reach a direct agreement with the native family concerned, for instance for the protection of an important site related to identity. This method is akin to individual consultation. For other communities, the businesses have developed harmonization mechanisms. Thus, they are able to share data and communicate using a more comprehensive approach. Occasionally, these communications have allowed them to develop memoranda of understanding. For the industries, participation of First Nations communities is a complex aspect of the application of the FSC standard. In addition, many First Nations communities prefer to deal directly with government authorities. In these situations, the role a company can play becomes fairly vague.

We may note that, in order to satisfy the FSC standard, companies use various participation mechanisms to contact the targeted participants. The diversity of these mechanisms allows them to meet the various needs of forest stakeholders.

A few definitions

Participation: Any direct or indirect action by individuals formally or informally representing segments of the public and intending to influence a decision, plan, or policy;

Consultation: An exchange of ideas and opinions which may not necessarily be taken into consideration by the decision-maker;

Consensus building: An exchange of information and a comparison of ideas intended to develop a course of action that will satisfy most of the interested parties;

Harmonization: An action meant to reconcile management practices and orient them towards a common objective through the establishment of trade-offs that are acceptable to all parties.

Canadian Standards Association

The CSA/Z809 forest certification standard demands public participation in all phases of the certification initiative. Local values must be incorporated into the decision-making process. Moreover, the public must be constantly informed as to the work in progress.

In Québec, all the businesses certified in accordance with this standard have used structured consensus-building roundtables. The businesses are responsible for the process: they must invite the participants, establish the meeting venue, prepare the documents, etc. These consensus-building roundtables are forums in which people can discuss their concerns. They generally involve three stages (Fig. 1).

The process starts with an ice-breaking stage during which people get acquainted. The group sets the roundtable's operating rules. Members are generally users of the forest area to be certified. Therefore, the roundtable sets the procedure to be followed in preparing the sustainable forest management (SFM) plan. Once this task is completed, the stakeholders get to know one another and learn to work together. This phase allows preparation of the basis of the work to be done.

The next step is identifying the local factors of importance to the participants. The roundtable must define the local factors they consider of vital importance, and from these determine the objectives to be achieved by the company. This work allows people to identify the type of management they expect on the landbase. Over the course of several meetings, the group shares ideas, eventually settling on the SFM plan for the area to be certified.

After implementation of the SFM plan, the group continues to meet. The company submits the results obtained on the ground. At this point, the business must determine whether or not it has achieved the indicators set out in the plan. Once the objectives are achieved, the roundtable must set new ones. So long as the company wishes to maintain its certification, the roundtable must be working, and it must commit itself to a process of continuous improvement.

The CSA standard requires implementation of a detailed participation process which remains stable over time. Mainly, this participation offers participants a place to bring out their concerns, where they can develop their common vision of forest management, and make it evolve.

Sustainable Forestry Initiative

The SFI standard includes principles, objectives, and environmental performance initiatives. The standard is based on the continuous improvement of the stakeholders making up the forest management chain and on policies that are both flexible and discretionary. Nonetheless, the SFI standard (2002-04) sets basic objectives that must be met. As to public participation, Objective # 8 fosters forest management practices among local wood product suppliers through education and training. Objective #10, on the other hand, states that a business requesting certification should encourage local landowners to pursue sustainable forest management through education programs and participation.

To satisfy these objectives, companies certified according to the SFI standard use four participation mechanisms. First, the SFI standard, like the other standards, requires conformity with the laws and

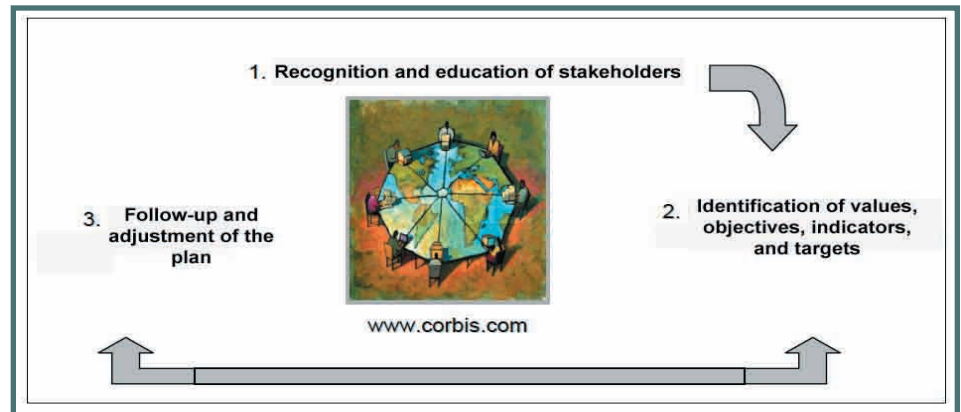


Figure 1. Three-stage operation of tables (CSA Standard).



regulations in the area. Therefore, businesses also use provincial participation mechanisms to satisfy legal requirements to show their commitment to the public.

Second, businesses that are certified in accordance with the SFI standard are active in existing participation exercises, such as integrated management roundtables, steering committees, and others. Companies use these processes to demonstrate their presence in their area to certification auditors. Notwithstanding their active participation, however, none of the businesses under study are actually responsible for these exercises; they simply take part in them. Nonetheless, these meetings do provide opportunities for stakeholders to discuss matters with these forest companies.

Third, companies certified in accordance with the SFI standard use their ISO-14001 environmental management systems (EMS) to also fulfil the criteria for public participation objectives. The companies have a mechanism integrated into their EMS that allows them to compile external requests. A follow-up procedure is developed that allows stakeholders to make their voices heard and demonstrates that their requests will be taken into account. This method conveys information to citizens who have made requests and, at times, initiates a dialogue between the interested parties.

Finally, the focal point of participation within the SFI standard is through the education of suppliers and people linked to the forest. Companies offer education sessions on the good forest practices conveyed by the SFI standard. The main target audience is the private landowners. Companies also try to inform the general public about the standard and the practices it favours. They provide information to people interested in forestry through brochures and public forums.

These four processes represent the approaches used by businesses certified in accordance with the SFI standard. Thus, these businesses have been able to raise their profile in the community and reach out to groups that are usually not very involved in the more formal participation processes.

Conclusion

We note that public participation differs according to the certification standard chosen by the business to secure recognition of its forestry practices (See Table 1). Nonetheless, we note common elements in all three standards. In all cases, the certification standards specify new guidelines for participation processes, in addition to the procedures required by law. Thus, the standards contribute to improving the implementation of public participation processes, and by the same token, the standards can lead to improved management practices as a result of the participation process. This presumes the certified businesses are open to listening and sharing responsibility for their on-the-ground management practices. Additionally, certification initiatives call upon forest managers to think innovatively about participation, for instance by providing in-the-field activities for the participants. However, the

Standard	Individual Processes	Deliberative Processes
FSC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal mechanisms • Individual agreements and consultations • Relationships with the First Nations communities* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal mechanisms • Information tables, IRM roundtables, and steering committee
CSA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus-building roundtables
SFI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External communications (ISO-14001) • Education of private landowners • Legal mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional processes (consensus-building roundtables; steering committee) • Education of the forest community • Legal mechanisms
<p>*Relationships with First Nations communities are considered individual processes since meetings are held with families or councils for informal discussions. These are not processes allowing for exchanges among several groups.</p>		

Table 1. Participation mechanisms used by the businesses studied within this project.



mechanisms used have certain limitations with respect to subjects of a provincial scope; for example, Québec's protected areas strategy or land development agreements with First Nations communities.

These internationally recognized certification standards establish a favourable context for public participation. Their objectives are better defined, which makes group dynamics easier. Finally, the presence of various standards creates multiple approaches for citizens to become involved in forest management. From a perspective of continuous improvement, these processes are expected to evolve. To achieve this, all participants, industrial and otherwise, will have to work together to further develop their common goals.

Further reading

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The views, conclusions and recommendations contained in this publication are those of the authors and should not be construed as endorsement by the Sustainable Forest Management Network.

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Graphics & Layout: K. Kopra
Translation: Ernest Chiasson and Jocelyne Verret

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ISSN 1715-0981

Management Recommendations

- Certification can open the door for initiating dialogue with local stakeholders.
- A certification initiative can become a tool for facilitating the implementation of public participation processes.
- Certification can allow the initiator to better define his expectations and those of other participants regarding the scope and outcome of public participation exercises.
- Certification offers a reference framework and guideposts for how public participation processes can be implemented and maintained.