

YFF Review



Public Lands Certification

A summary of a forum exploring the implications for sustainability of certification of public lands, and whether private rule-making and public policy can co-exist in the forest.

A Yale Forest Forum Event

February 25, 2002

Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry

New Haven, Connecticut

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YFF Review

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Public Lands Certification

A summary of a forum exploring the implications for sustainability of certification of public lands, and whether private rule-making and public policy can co-exist in the forest.

Issue Editor
Benjamin D. Hodgdon

Series Editor
Mary L. Tyrrell

Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry
School of Forestry and Environmental Studies
Yale University

360 Prospect Street, New Haven CT 06511
phone (203) 432-5117 fax (203) 432-3809
email: gisf@yale.edu web: www.yale.edu/gisf



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Executive Summary



In recent years, forest certification has been the object of considerable attention in both the conservation community and the forest products industry. Proponents claim that it represents an ideal way to ensure the environmental, economic, and social sustainability of commercial forestry operations. Under certification regimes, forest management operations are audited by third-party certifiers against an agreed-upon set of environmental, economic and social standards. If the operation passes the test, its products can be certified as coming from sustainably managed forests, thus providing access to markets where demand exists for certified products. Thus the company is given financial rewards for complying with certification standards, making the process a “market-based tool” for ensuring sustainable forest management.

An important question in the analysis of forest certification in the United States is its applicability for use with public land management. There is widespread disagreement about whether or not public lands should be certified. To date, only state lands have been certified; the Forest Service has not attempted to achieve certification for any of its lands. Many think that the benefits that certification has brought to private lands could appropriately be applied to public lands. Others, including the Forest Service and some conservation groups, hold that certification will not address the core issues at stake in the management of federal lands.

Recognizing the importance of this issue, the Yale Forest Forum and the Program on Forest Certification organized a public forum entitled “Certification of Public Lands” on February 25, 2002 to engage a number of perspectives on this question. Four speakers representing different organizations spoke at the forum held at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, in New Haven, Connecticut. Their remarks were followed by a brief question-and-answer session. The purpose of the forum was to discuss the development of forest certification, and to explore the experiences of different organizations and the future outlook for certification of public lands. The forum was moderated by Michael Washburn, who was then the Director of the Program on Forest Certification at Yale University.

Gerald Rose, who worked for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources as state forester for 14 years, provided a “Minnesota perspective” on certification. Rose concentrated his remarks on the state’s experience certifying 550,000 acres of state- and county-managed lands. He emphasized the fact that, while costly, certification brought tangible benefits. Specifically, certification “proved” to the public through credible, independent verification that the department’s forestry practices were sustainable. In addition, certification assessments pointed out important areas for improvement. The state is thus trying to certify more state lands, although budgetary constraints are a significant obstacle.

Linda Brett is a policy analyst with the national office of the United States Forest Service. Brett focused her comments on Forest Service policy towards certification on federal lands. The current policy is that the Forest Service has no intention of pursuing certification on any lands in the national forest system. She cited a number of reasons for this. First, the Forest Service is responsible to a wide range of communities across the nation – while some support certification, others have concerns that it would marginalize small, private producers. Second, Brett indicated that she thinks the jury is still out on certification, and whether or not it will survive. Moreover, she stressed that when the Forest Service discussed certification with the certification programs and major retail purchasers of wood products, they all urged the Forest Service not to attempt to certify. However, the Forest Service generally supports the idea of certification, and does not want to stand in the way of its development in the private sector.

Daniel Hall, Director of the Forest Biodiversity Program of the American Lands Alliance, gave a conservationist’s perspective. Hall began by describing the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) system and why his organization supports it over other certification programs. He then explained the major benefits of certification on private lands, emphasizing the extent to which it is truly a revolutionary tool for improving forest management. Despite this, Hall said, many conservationists oppose

certification on public lands, and on federal lands in particular. First, many think that no commercial logging, no matter how exemplary, should be carried out on federal lands. In addition, the management of federal lands is not and should not be market driven; thus certification is an inappropriate tool for improving forestry practice in the national forest system.

Finally, Paul Harlan, Vice President for Resources for the Collins Companies, spoke about his firm's views on the certification of federal lands. Harlan explained the numerous benefits of certification, stressing how it brings up issues related to sustainability that we all need to consider. Harlan then spoke about the need for the United States in general, and for federal land managers in particular, to take a lead role in the search for sustainability. He suggested that it is imperative for federal land managers to engage certification as a way to enter into constructive dialogue on sustainability.

Issue Introduction

Certification is an emerging forest policy and management tool for using market forces to promote sustainable forestry practices. Over the past ten years, a number of certification programs have emerged with the task of setting standards for sustainable forestry and inspecting forestry operations against them. Operations that are judged to have met such standards can be certified, and are commonly given access to a label that indicates to the marketplace that their forestry practices are sustainable.

In the United States, two major certification programs have emerged over the past ten years. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is an international body which sets overarching principles and criteria, and then relies on national and regional sub-bodies to craft specific standards relevant to local contexts. FSC is governed by a board which is divided broadly into three chambers: environmental, social, and economic. The other major certification program is the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), which focuses its efforts mainly in the United States and Canada. SFI was launched by the American Forest & Paper Association and is overseen by the Sustainable Forestry Board.

Certification means different things in different contexts – especially when considering various landownership types. In the United States, the key difference is between private lands and public lands. Public lands include municipal, state and federal lands. The vast majority of land certified to date in the United States has been on private industrial ownerships. Though in recent years a number of state lands have been certified, certification of public lands in general has progressed more slowly. In particular, no federal lands under the national forest system have been certified, and the United States Forest Service, as well as a number of prominent conservation organizations, expressly oppose certification of federal lands.

The issue of certification of public lands is a unique case. Certification, after all, is a market driven system which focuses on private forms of governance. Public lands, on the other hand, are entities driven by

the public policy process. It is for this reason that many see certification as unsuitable for application to public land management. But given the benefits that certification has been seen to bring to private ownerships, many others assert that certification is an appropriate tool for improving forest management on public lands.

The uniqueness of this case brings a number of different perspectives to the table. Recognizing the importance of this issue, and the relative lack of attention it has received, the Program on Forest Certification hosted a forum at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies on February 25, 2002, bringing together four individuals who represent a diversity of views. The following is a summary of their remarks.



Panelists Linda Brett, Daniel Hall, Paul Harlan and Gerald Rose at the forum.

Presenter Summaries

GERALD ROSE

Sustainable Forestry Representative
National Association of State Foresters



Gerald Rose serves on the board of directors of the Certified Forest Products Council, a body that focuses on the marketing of certified wood products, as well as on the board of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), a major certification program in the United States. Having worked as Minnesota state forester for 14 years, Rose gave what he referred to as a “Minnesota perspective” on forest certification.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages 4.2 million acres of land, about 3 million of which are timberland. The DNR became involved in certification largely because of interest on the part of Mr. Rose, but he emphasized that he would not have pursued certification if there had not been significant interest on the part of many in the department. There were four key elements that led to the DNR’s involvement. First, the department wanted to learn more about certification. Certification had received a great deal of attention and the DNR was curious to learn what it was all about. Second, the DNR wanted to evaluate the sustainability of its operations and learn how it could improve. Minnesota had passed a sustainable forest resources act in 1995 which enabled communities to draft management guidelines and monitoring strategies for forestry operations. The DNR was interested in seeing how this act would measure up to a certification regime.

Third, the department wanted to be able to verify to the public that it was managing the land sustainably. The DNR generally thought it was doing a good job, but was often accused of “raping the forest” by some groups. Thus the department saw third-party, independent assessments of its forestry practices both as a way to prove that its practices were sustainable, and to learn about areas for improvement from a credible independent body. Finally, certification was seen as a way to gain improved market share and potential increased cash returns. Being a

"We feel the benefits of certification will outweigh the risks and costs, but we are proceeding cautiously and consciously."

— Gerald Rose

public agency, the DNR was not relying heavily on market share, but the department saw that if cash returns could be increased, this would help in ensuring greater financial stability. Moreover, the need for certification was seen by the department as a way to leverage more funding from the state legislature; the DNR thus used the costs of certification to increase its budgetary allocations from the state.

Minnesota's DNR did not certify the whole 3 million acres of timberland under its management. They started small—together with the Aitkin County Land Department, which managed about 223,000 acres of county land, the DNR sought certification of 291,000 acres of state land. The SmartWood Program, a certifier accredited by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), was chosen to carry out the certification assessment. Both the Aitkin County lands and those under DNR management were judged to be certifiable above the standard for the region, and SmartWood certified the lands – totaling about 550,000 acres – in 1997. The DNR then planned to certify an additional 1.3 million acres in surrounding areas, but was unsuccessful in securing funding from the state to do so.

The costs incurred by the assessments were substantial. In total, certification costs came to about \$0.10 per acre (\$55,000 in all) for the initial certification, the funding for which was secured through a foundation grant. Future assessments are projected to cost between \$0.15-\$0.17 per acre; the annual license fee is \$1000, and the annual or random audits will run up to \$5000. Moreover, additional costs were incurred by the requirement that the DNR advance the timetable necessary to ensure sustainability at a broad landscape level. This included upgrades in computer equipment, salaries for mapping and strategic planning, ecological classification and inventories, staff training, and the production of public awareness materials. Thus the DNR clearly made a substantial investment and is committed to continuing this in expanding the amount of certified lands under its management.

For the future, the DNR is considering certifying more lands, and is interested in having joint FSC/SFI assessments. However, expanding the amount of certified land is made difficult by budgetary shortfalls. And chain-of-custody producers down the value chain are dropping out on certification, citing much higher costs than expected with few financial benefits. This presents a challenge to public land managers in justifying certification to its customers. Cutting costs of certification is therefore a key challenge to the certification of public lands.

**LINDA BRETT**

Policy Analyst
United States Forest Service

"Certification is a promising tool; the Forest Service doesn't want to be the one that makes it more difficult for it succeed."

— Linda Brett

As a policy analyst for the national office of the Forest Service, Linda Brett looks at issues of regional and national significance to offer advice to the Forest Service for consideration. Brett first got involved in certification in November 2000, when the Chief of the Forest Service asked for a review of the agency's policy on the issue.

The current policy is one of limited support. First, the Forest Service supports certification and the general idea of sustainability, not only here in the United States but globally as well, through research and other studies. An example is the comparative analysis of FSC and SFI carried out by the Meridian Institute.

On the other hand, it is not the policy at this time and for the foreseeable future to pursue third-party certification of the national forest system lands. The Forest Service cooperates with outside bodies that would like to look at certification on public lands, but the agency itself will not seek it and will not pay for it. At present, the Forest Service is considering whether or not to establish a system of independent management verification for national forest system lands – a “longhand” phrase for an auditing system.

Many people are not very impressed with Forest Service policy on certification. It comes across somewhat as a piece of “bureaucratese,” a “do as I say, not as I do” kind of policy. Indeed, this policy begs the question: “if the Forest Service supports certification, why won't it undergo assessment itself?” especially as state lands (like in Minnesota) are being certified across the country. Why the difference, when they are all public lands? Moreover, since national forest lands are required by law to manage in a responsible and environmentally-sound manner—including provisions on biodiversity, endangered species,

clean water and clean air—it would seem they would be ideal candidates for certification.

To understand Forest Service policy, it is useful to explore some of the arguments for and against certification. One of the key arguments for certification on public lands is the fact that many forest dependent communities in the West believe that certification will stabilize their economies by improving the market access of their wood products. At the same time, non-industrial private landowners, primarily in the East, fear the adoption of certification on public lands could translate into a national standard that would subject such small landowners to unfair competition. Such landowners believe that certification would be too costly for them to remain competitive.

Third-party certification would allow the Forest Service to take credit for its good management practices, while exposing the areas that need improvement. Since national forest lands belong to the people, it makes sense to have public disclosure of management practices on public lands. State foresters, as we heard with the Minnesota experience, report positive results from the certification process.

However, the jury is still out on certification. It is potentially an extremely effective tool; the environmental community, which initially developed certification, has shown a high degree of maturity in looking to the market to promote sustainable forestry. But there are competing certification systems, representing highly differentiated stakeholders, largely divided between industrial interests and environmental groups. Some have questioned, given this playing field and the vagaries of natural resource politics, if certification will be able to survive.

Significantly, when the Forest Service was looking at certification and it went to talk with the certifying bodies and major purchasers like Home Depot and Lowe's, without exception these groups unanimously advised against pursuing certification of national forest system lands.

At the same time, these groups advised that the Forest Service had a problem with its credibility, with “social license,” and that something needed to be done about it. The reason for such advice reflects in large part the constituencies of these groups—that is, certain certifying bodies are responsive to the significant portion of the public that feels national forests should be managed only for biodiversity and natural habitat, not for logging. Certification of national forests would be a de facto endorsement of commercial logging on such lands.

A further reason for Forest Service policy is that the current regulations governing forestry practice on federal lands are very strong. These regulations are appropriate, and the Forest Service is answerable to the public in its commitment to meet them. Mechanisms are in place for internal audits at present, and the Forest Service is looking to see if they might be adaptable to some form of independent audit process. The Forest Service is therefore hoping that experimenting with such verification processes might reap it some of the benefits of “social license” that certification brings. Certification is a promising tool; the Forest Service doesn’t want to make it more difficult for it to succeed. Somewhere down the road, the agency hopes to be able to cooperate with the certification systems to work out some of the problems of “social license” and management of public lands.

In the long run, Brett reminded us that it is important to keep in mind that over 70% of the nation’s forests are privately owned. Certification is a most promising tool for such forests, and the Forest Service supports certification of private lands.

DANIEL HALL

Director, Forest Biodiversity Program
American Lands Alliance

American Lands Alliance is a non-profit public interest resource conservation group based in Washington, D.C. The Alliance works with grassroots organizations and citizens groups across the United States to conserve and protect wildlife and wild places. Maintaining and improving the regulatory framework for forest conservation is an important element in Hall’s work, as well as finding incentives for land managers to practice sustainable forestry. Hall sees the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as the most promising model currently in existence to achieve these twin aims.

As a market-based tool, FSC certification is an effective way of recognizing good forest management among those already practicing it, and of encouraging better forest management among others. FSC, along with other certification programs, has set itself up as an organization charged with identifying good forest management. In addition to evaluating to what extent these programs are leveraging improvements in forest management, it is necessary to evaluate the measures of sustainability used in certification systems.

To do this, we need a clear definition of what sustainability means. The FSC Principles and Criteria emphasize the needs of the whole forest, not just timberlands, and for this reason they are on the right track. This approach emphasizes the need for restoration of degraded lands and the maintenance of biodiversity at the landscape scale.

This is a difficult task, and results will vary widely from place to place, depending on the level of economic, social and ecological constraints present. So we should look to certification systems to identify exemplary management and use this as a model elsewhere, specific to the context of ownership type. FSC therefore attempts to balance the economic, social



"Conservationists tend to doubt that certification would leverage much improvement of forest management on federal lands."

— Daniel Hall

and ecological factors at play in any given forest management operation. Conservationists' thinking on certification of public lands varies, largely depending on whether the lands are state or federal. While many support certification on state lands, most do not support it on federal lands. First, many conservationists think that no logging, no matter how exemplary, should be allowed on federal lands. This is especially the case in important watershed areas, primary forest, and endangered species habitats. And though many recognize that Forest Service forest practices have improved over the past few years, federal agencies are known to frequently violate environmental laws and seek exemptions from national policies meant to ensure forest conservation. Second, conservationists see little need for certification of federal lands. Management of federal lands is not market driven and shouldn't be; thus certification, as a market-based tool, is inadequate as a regulatory framework. Putting these pieces together, conservationists tend to doubt that certification would leverage much improvement of forest management on federal lands.

Having said this, it is useful to look at how FSC itself has approached the question of certification of federal lands. In the late 1990s, FSC released its policy on this issue – it dealt with it not by saying “yes” or “no,” but by asking, “how would it be certified?” As a result, the existing FSC policy identified a number of major thresholds that would have to be met for federal lands to be certified – including agency transparency, social accountability, and the promulgation of a national standard in accordance with FSC protocol that could be applied in assessments of federal lands. This is an important step by FSC; and it is important to recognize that though there are other certification systems currently operating in the United States, only FSC is attempting to deal with the issue of certification of federal lands.

PAUL HARLAN

Vice President for Resources
The Collins Companies

Harlan considers himself a “liberal industrial forester,” and he spoke about his firm and its views on the certification of public lands. Forest certification has a number of different definitions. To Harlan, it is a market-based initiative to promote the sustainable management and responsible consumption of forest resources. The key words are that it is “market based” and that it “promotes sustainable management.” It is a truly unique tool for promoting better management through the consumer end. However, as we are finding out, it is likely one of the most complicated endeavors ever undertaken by humankind.

Given this, up to this point it has been remarkably successful, as evidenced by the number of certification programs that have emerged over the past few years. It is even approaching being the norm rather than the exception, which it was in 1993 when Collins' lands were first certified under the FSC guidelines. Certification has been hugely influential in the way it has made us re-examine the work we do; moreover, it has changed substantially the way we go about forestry.

The key question, How does public lands certification fit in? is one we are just beginning to grapple with. Part of the question has already been answered by the fact that large tracts of public land, in Minnesota and elsewhere, have been certified. The other part of the question, however, and the harder one to handle is, What is to be done with federal lands? Public lands should be certified, and a review of why we think this is true is a useful exercise.

Certification of public lands is clearly very important to the future of land management in the United States. First, certification has been successfully applied to public lands in other parts of the world. This is especially true in Europe where forests are managed by state agencies. Second, the United States is the worldwide leader in environmental



"Certification of public lands is imperative to the search for sustainability, and we have a moral and ethical obligation to pursue it."

— Paul Harlan

performance, and it is important that we set an example in the search for sustainability. Third, certification is a process of exploration and learning; not a single one of us has all the answers, and certifying lands is a commitment to engage constant discussion about sustainability. Public land managers need to be committed to such a process and gain from it as well.

Fourth, the public should be taking the lead in this process. The public domain, and public land management, should be taking the lead in the search for sustainability; it is critical that society engage in this dialogue and certification is an important way to do so. Finally, exemplary forestry is exactly that, regardless of where it is practiced. The land does not discriminate between political boundaries, neither should the tools that can be used to promote sustainability. Certification of public lands is therefore imperative to the search for sustainability, and we have a moral and ethical obligation to pursue it.

For certification to succeed, federal lands must be included. We must be able to show that we are leading by example. What mixed signals are we sending when we tell others to certify but are unwilling to ourselves? We cannot adopt the stance where we promote sustainability elsewhere, “but not in my backyard.” Federal lands, and all public lands, must take the leadership role by engaging certification and all the issues surrounding sustainability that it brings up. By doing so, land management agencies will be more informed about their management and this will lead to substantive improvements.

Discussion Summary

Following is a summary of the panel's responses to issues raised by the audience.

Potential for first-party certification of public lands

Linda Brett

In the sense that USFS makes its forest management plans, then tries to follow them, and then opens it up to appeals and judicial review, the Forest Service is already first-party, self-certified. In our experience, however, this does not provide much in terms of the social license or in verifying to the public that practices are in fact sustainable. This is the real benefit of certification, which first-party certification does not provide. In fact, many currently say that USFS is not doing all that it should. And while I would respectfully disagree, the point is that there is disagreement here, and self-certification does not solve this problem. For USFS to say “we're good because we say we're good” doesn't cut it in a public forum.

Daniel Hall

The credibility of certification hinges on several things, but the reliance on independent, third-party verification is one of the most crucial elements. If I walk around saying “I'm a great guy,” there's a certain level of credibility to that [laughter]; but if someone you know and trust tells you I'm a great guy, that's very different, and you're more likely to believe it.

Participation of other stakeholders in the process of getting Minnesota public lands certified

Gerald Rose

Because we got into the process rather quickly, we involved staff [from the DNR], but we did not talk much with local environmental groups. We did not consult with industry very much beforehand either. Back then, SFI was not what it is today, and we didn't think it was worth trying for, but of course it's changed greatly since then and is now a rather

stringent system. So there might have been more consultation if that option had existed. That said, we did garner a number of letters of support from NGOs, and involving these partners has been important. For example, the DNR was criticized for some of its management practices in Aitkin County a few years ago. I wrote a letter in defense, but I later found out that the head of the local Audubon had also written a letter in our defense, and it was much stronger than my own.

Certification as an incentive to resolving the conflict over logging on federal lands

Linda Brett

In a nutshell, I don't think that certification would resolve this conflict. Because when you get right down to it, it's less of an issue about how we're doing it than it is about the fact we're doing it at all. I am a believer in adaptive management, like most of my colleagues, and things with USFS can certainly change. The Forest Service was initially established to restore lands that many saw as depleted. In the 1950s, however, with the baby boom, USFS shifted to a more industrial focus, which lasted for the better part of 40 years. More recently, there has been a significant backlash to operating under such a model. And I think that before we can address the issue of certification, we need to address this conflict over the use of federal lands, and the range of regulations that go along with public land management.

Daniel Hall

I would add that it is useful to take a close look at what conservation groups are asking for when they oppose the current management practices on federal lands. Many conservationists are not against restoration forestry for example, and their concerns run from restructuring management agencies to reforming regulatory policies. In this way, it is not simply an out-and-out opposition to USFS and logging on federal lands.

A role for universities like Yale in the process of certifying public lands

Paul Harlan

I think a primary role for an institution like Yale is to educate people that what we're talking about here is not just certification, but the underlying issues of sustainability. As we've talked about here today, in the context of public versus private lands certification, the real issue is overall sustainability of our land management practices. Certification, therefore, is a kind of proxy, getting at more overarching issues, that I think we as a nation and as a society need to deal with. And this message is hard to get down to every neighborhood and community; that we're talking about more than just certification.

Gerald Rose

If we're truly interested in ecosystems and watersheds and habitats, then the emphasis on ownership needs to be replaced. We have to ask ourselves what we want at the landscape level – how much of what kind and where? Looking at that across the broader scale and achieving success means ending our focus on different types of ownership and working together. As public institutions of learning, universities play a very important role in getting this kind of message across.

Resources for More Information

FORUM PARTICIPANTS

LINDA BRETT

Policy Analyst

Programs & Legislation
USDA Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20250
lbrett@fs.fed.us

DANIEL HALL

Director, Forest Biodiversity Program

American Lands Alliance
726 Seventh Street SE
Washington, DC 20003
wafcbp@americanlands.org

PAUL HARLAN

VP Resources

The Collins Companies
PO Box 1340
Lakeview, OR 97630
pharlan@collinsco.com

GERALD ROSE

Forest Sustainability Representative

National Association of State
Foresters
10279 County 426 E Road
Cornell, MI 49818
jerryrose@uplogon.com

WEB RESOURCES

American Lands Alliance
www.americanlands.org

Certified Forest Products Council
www.certifiedwood.org

Forest Stewardship Council (International)
www.fscoax.org

Forest Stewardship Council (US)
fscus.org/html

Forest Trends
www.forest-trends.org

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
www.dnr.state.mn.us

National Wildlife Federation
www.nwf.org

Pan European Forest Certification
www.pefc.org

Rainforest Alliance
www.rainforest-alliance.org

Scientific Certification Systems
www.scs1.com

Société Générale de Surveillance
www.sgs.com

SmartWood Program
www.smartwood.org

Sustainable Forestry Initiative
www.aboutsfi.org

Yale University Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry
Program on Forest Certification
<http://research.yale.edu/gisf/ypfc>

Additional Readings

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The Yale Forest Forum (YFF) was established in 1994 by a diverse group of leaders in forestry to focus national attention on forest policy and management in the United States. The group convened the Seventh American Forest Congress (SAFC) to collaboratively develop and articulate a common vision of forest management to diverse stakeholders.

For over 100 years, the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (FES) has had a rich history in the pursuit of sustainable forestry. From the establishment of the School in 1901 Yale has played an integral role in the development of leaders who are prepared to confront the environmental challenges of the day.



**Marsh Hall, home of GISF,
on the Yale University campus**

The School's Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry (GISF), housed in historic Marsh Hall, continues this rich tradition. Established by the Dean and a group of FES faculty members in 2000, GISF has launched new, innovative initiatives while coalescing and coordinating the many activities related to sustainable forest management at the School, including the School Forests and the Yale Forest Forum. The Institute was created to

address the management and conservation of both domestic and international forestlands in a holistic and comprehensive fashion. In pursuit of these ideals, GISF has developed several formal programs including the Program on Private Forests, the Program on Forest Certification, The Forests Dialogue, the Program on Forest Physiology and Biotechnology, the Program on Landscape Management, and the Program in Tropical Forestry.

The Yale Forest Forum is now the convening body of the Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry. Through YFF, GISF often holds multiple events each week at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and hosts workshops and seminars held outside the School, involving stakeholders from all sectors.

**For more information or
additional copies
of our publications,
please contact us at:**

**Yale Forest Forum
360 Prospect Street
New Haven, CT 06511**

**Phone: (203) 432.5117
Fax (203) 432.3809
Email: gisf@yale.edu
Web: www.yale.edu/gisf**



Yale School of Forestry
and Environmental Studies
360 Prospect Street
New Haven, Connecticut 06511
USA

Mission of the Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry

"To foster leadership through innovative programs and activities in research, education and outreach; to create and test new tools and methods; and to understand better and support sustainable forest management worldwide."