

The Washington Post

Two Timber Firms Pretending To Be 'Green,' Groups Allege

Environmentalists Want Companies' Lucrative Certification Revoked

By Blaine Harden
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, December 24, 2006

SEATTLE -- Two of the nation's largest timber companies, Weyerhaeuser and Plum Creek Timber, have polished their public images for years by participating in a program that certifies that their logging is environmentally friendly.

But in separate challenges this month from the far corners of the United States, environmental groups in Washington state and in Maine are accusing Weyerhaeuser Co. and Plum Creek Timber Co. of using the forest industry's green-labeling program as a cover while they log in ways that harm endangered spotted owls in Washington and violate forestry laws in Maine.

The Seattle Audubon Society and the Natural Resources Council of Maine have demanded in documents sent to the Sustainable Forestry Board that it revoke certification for the companies until they comply with standards they have pledged to uphold.

Both companies say the demands are unjustified and show ignorance of relevant facts.

The requests mark the first time that mainstream environmental groups have publicly attempted to turn the forest industry's green certification process against big timber companies by insisting that they be suspended from the program, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, said William H. Banzhaf, president of the forestry board, which oversees certification.

Green labeling is a major marketing tool in the timber industry. It allows companies to reach a bigger marketplace while assuring increasingly sophisticated consumers that their purchases are not harming the environment.

As worry about global warming increases, green building codes are becoming politically fashionable. They have recently been adopted for private construction in the District, Montgomery County and Pasadena, Calif. Eighteen states and 11 federal agencies use such codes for their own buildings. And green codes often give credit to builders who use timber certified to have been logged in a sustainable way.

The timber industry's main lobby, the American Forest & Paper Association, developed the Sustainable Forest Initiative in 1994. That was a year after the Forest Stewardship Council, a group of environmentalists, forestry experts, sociologists and indigenous groups, created another certification system that is often described as far less friendly to the interests of big timber companies.

The competing certification regimes are usually referred to by initialisms -- SFI and FSC -- that can be easily confused. Some environmentalists say this is an intentional industry effort to muddy the green-labeling waters and confuse the public. Timber companies dispute that assertion.

Unlike the industry-created SFI program, FSC rules allow virtually no cutting of old-growth forests, nor do

Advertisement



Shoot now, focus later
with the Lytro camera.

LYTRO Buy Now >

they allow operators to log off a diverse stand of trees and replace it with a plantation forest dominated by a single species, which is often done to enhance the commercial value of forestland.

Home Depot, Ikea and Williams-Sonoma are among the major retailers that have announced their preference for FSC-certified lumber or paper. The U.S. Green Building Council, which oversees green standards for construction in the District and Montgomery County, among other places, credits only builders that use FSC lumber. But other retailers, such as OfficeMax, have preferences that do not distinguish between certification systems.

The Seattle Audubon Society and the Natural Resources Council of Maine argue that the Sustainable Forest Initiative could lose all credibility if its board does not suspend Weyerhaeuser and Plum Creek until they clean up their forestry practices.

Banzhaf, president of the Sustainable Forestry Board, said the complaints from responsible environmental groups in Washington and Maine are an "important" challenge to the certification system and will be thoroughly investigated.

At the same time, Banzhaf defends the integrity of the SFI certification process, noting that since 2002 it has been "independent of all influence by the forestry trade association."

The program hires third-party certification companies and is financed through licensing fees and foundation grants, he said. Its board members include leaders of major environmental groups, such as the Nature Conservancy, as well as senior state foresters and the heads of several major timber companies, including Plum Creek and Weyerhaeuser.

The separate but nearly simultaneous challenges to the forest industry's certification program appear to be a coincidence.

Over the past year, the Natural Resources Council of Maine has used the state's freedom-of-information law to uncover 18 previously unpublicized violations of state forestry laws by Plum Creek, the largest private owner of timberland in the United States, with more than 900,000 acres in Maine.

The council learned that Plum Creek, without public notice, had been fined \$57,000 for its repeated forestry violations, the largest such fine in Maine's history. The violations included cutting too much timber without proper plans and failing to notify the state about clear-cuts.

"Our concern is that consumers in Maine are being routinely misled into thinking that Plum Creek is managing sustainably, when, in fact, they are not complying with basic laws," said Cathy Johnson, the group's project director for the North Woods.

Maine's chief forester, Alec Giffen, confirmed Plum Creek's violations between 1998 and 2002. "We have not had any other case that involved a \$57,000 fine, nor have we had any other case where there was this number of noncompliant timber harvests," he said.

But Giffen said Plum Creek self-reported many of the violations and has taken corrective actions. "They have a good compliance history since 2002," he said.

An executive at Plum Creek said it would be "absurd" to revoke the company's SFI certification.

"We get it right 99 percent of the time," said Jim Lehner, who was general manager for Plum Creek's northeast region during the time of the violations and is now its director of community affairs. "It was certainly a mistake. We made a mistake. The fine was a big one. We haven't had any violations since."

Lehner said the Natural Resources Council of Maine is trying to discredit Plum Creek as part of its campaign to halt the company's plans for large-scale residential development in the North Woods around Moosehead Lake.

In Washington state, the Seattle Audubon Society does not allege that Weyerhaeuser, the largest manager of timberlands in the world, broke any state or federal laws. But Audubon says that the company logged its forestland in southwestern Washington in a way that harmed the habitat of four endangered Northern spotted owls and violated SFI certification standards by failing to "protect known sites" of imperiled creatures.

Northern spotted owls were placed on the federal endangered species list in 1990, but their numbers have declined by 50 percent since then in Washington state, in part because of continued loss of habitat.

To protect the reclusive birds, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service urges timber companies in the Northwest to refrain from logging more than 60 percent of older trees in areas around known owl nests. Those areas are called owl circles.

The Audubon group, however, cites government and industry estimates showing that circles around four owls on Weyerhaeuser land were much more aggressively cut, leaving between 8 percent and 22 percent of the suitable habitat.

That logging concerned James Michaels, a supervising biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and an expert on spotted owls. His agency wrote a letter to Weyerhaeuser last year, asking the company to stop.

"It was enough of an issue to raise a flag with us to say we wanted to work with Weyerhaeuser so as not to put those birds at risk," Michaels said.

After Weyerhaeuser was warned about the risk, Michaels said, it suspended further plans for cutting trees near the birds and has been willing to work with federal officials.

A Weyerhaeuser spokesman, Frank Mendizabal, said the company "has not received any notice from any public agency that we have caused any harm" to the owls.

He said that Audubon's assertions that the company has violated SFI standards are without merit and that Weyerhaeuser "operates at the highest standards" for sustainable forestry.

Weyerhaeuser and Plum Creek have 45 days to respond to the certification challenges by the Seattle Audubon Society and the National Resources Council of Maine. A full investigation by the SFI system is likely to take several months.

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

© 2006 The Washington Post Company

Sponsored Links

Buy LifeLock® Protection

While you travel, ensure your identity is safeguarded with LifeLock®

Map Your Flood Risk

Find Floodplan Maps, Facts, FAQs, Your Flood Risk Profile and More!

Extended Stay Hotels

Get Fantastic Amenities, low rates! Kitchen, Ample Workspace, Free WIFI

Buy a link here