

# FSC vs. SFI: The Battle Rages On

**I**t's getting ridiculous. Will someone please show mercy on us, and drive a white pine stake through the heart of the debate between Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)? A white pine stake is what it takes to kill a vampire who keeps rising from the dead.

As I have reported widely in this column over the years, the SFI-FSC debate is an argument over what lumber standards should be accepted by LEED. Should FSC be the only standard LEED accepts, as it is now, or should the LEED standard be more inclusive, with the acceptance of SFI and other wood standards?

Why all the sound and fury?

Well, billions of dollars in wood and wood fiber sales are at stake in the acceptance of SFI (and other wood standards) within LEED. It's true that LEED doesn't have any meaningful percentage of the residential building market, but it is the dominant green standard among commercial structures, which buy lots of wood and wood fiber. The growth of LEED as a percentage of new construction has been dazzling. LEED went from 2% of non-residential construction starts in 2005 to 28%-35% in 2010, a dramatic rise. Today, LEED is referenced in project specifications for 71% of projects valued at \$50 million and over.

We all want a taste of that business, but managing FSC products is a pain. The FSC "chain of custody" certification is work-intensive to obtain/maintain, and FSC inventory can't be co-mingled with non-FSC-certified products.

Now LEED is being rewritten and—you guessed it—FSC and SFI are up for debate again. Under the proposed new LEED point system, there is a feature called Pilot Credit 43, and if it goes through after comment, SFI products may be finally accepted.

Just as background: As recently as December 2010, a proposed rewrite of LEED's certified wood policy was put to a vote, and acceptance of SFI was shot down. Of the 965 USGBC members who opted in to vote, 521 actually voted. Of those, 286—just 54%—voted to maintain FSC's monopoly.

You read that right: The fate of 190 million acres in SFI certified-forests was decided by 286 members of USGBC.

"USGBC's 4th draft of LEED version 4 still has many unanswered questions," said SFI's Jason Metnick. "USGBC has gotten rid of the MR7 point [the LEED section where certified wood and certified wood fiber are currently credited], and created a Responsible Extraction of Raw Materials credit, yet USGBC maintains that the only way to get a certified wood or certified wood fiber credit is to be 'FSC certified or USGBC approved equivalent.' There is no definition or guidance on what is meant by 'USGBC approved equivalent.' Furthermore, there are much less strict requirements on non-wood products—like those that are mined or quarried, i.e. steel or concrete—to get a credit. At SFI, we continue to call for full LEED acceptance of SFI wood and wood-forest products, including paper."

No surprises there.

Moreover, there has been some pro-SFI activism on the governmental front. Two Governors in the last eight months—Nathan Deal of Georgia and Paul LePage of Maine—signed executive orders directing that "any new or expanded state buildings shall incorporate 'Green Building' standards that give certification credits equally to forest products grown, manufactured, and certified under the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, the American Tree Farm System, and the Forest Stewardship Council."

The Georgia Executive Order stated, "Recognizing all forest certifications equally will help promote sustainable forestry in the State of Georgia and help create thousands of jobs while maintaining our strong outdoor heritage."

In September 2011, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a new program to promote wood in green building, noting that "Sustainability of forest products can be verified using any credible third-party rating system, such as SFI, FSC or ATFS certification." And to date, 89 Members of Congress and 14 Governors have written to the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC, the purveyor of the LEED standards) urging them to recognize SFI and other credible forest certification standards.

And if that's not enough: A recent letter from eight Members of Congress stated, "Broadening the number of eligible certification programs and the recognition of wood will provide a great incentive for the utilization of domestically produced forest products."

It's long overdue that SFI and other lumber standards be accepted by LEED in addition to FSC. ■

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