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Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation
and Standardization Policies

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Item 9 (c) of the provisional agenda

Environmental Management Schemes and Forest Certification

Note by the secretariat

The present document contains information on the activities of the UNECE Timber Committee related to issues arising from the certification of sustainable forest management.

This document has been prepared by the secretariat and is presented for information and consideration by the delegates.

ISSUES ARISING FROM THE CERTIFICATION OF SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

Background

1. Since the mid 1990s, the growing concern about deforestation, mostly in the tropics, and about the sustainability of forest management led some organizations to promote certification of sustainable forest management as one contribution to solving the problem, by setting clear standards for forest managers to apply, and by giving consumers information about how the wood was produced. The intention, expressed simply, was to encourage and reward those who did manage their forest sustainably with market outlets, possibly even price premiums, and to enable consumers, and even governments, to make informed purchase decisions with reliable information about the origin of the product.

2. By the end of the millennium, there were nearly 10 credible national or international certification schemes and millions of hectares of forest (mostly in the northern hemisphere) had been certified. The certification schemes and the sector as whole had had to face numerous sensitive issues, including:

- What exactly is sustainable forest management? Is it the same everywhere or does it vary according to circumstances?
- Who decides what is sustainable and what is not? Is compliance with national legislation sufficient?
- Given the global and complex nature of wood markets, with frequent mixes of raw material from different sources, how can the sustainably produced material be reliably identified?
- How compatible are the new systems with WTO rules, notably as regards PPM (Process and Production Methods)?

3. As of mid 2004, forest certification systems are well established in western Europe and north America (but not in the tropics), and consumers in several major markets have the opportunity to buy certified forest products. It is not clear whether forest management practices have in fact changed in the certified forests or whether certification has endorsed existing practices¹.

4. There are several major issues facing the sector, including:

- Will the multiplicity of certification schemes, and the fierce competition between them, confuse and discourage customers, thus reducing wood consumption, to the detriment of sustainable forest management everywhere?
- Are mechanisms needed to determine whether particular forest certification schemes are acceptable or not? If so, how should such a mechanism work?
- May governments encourage forest certification by trade measures or by public procurement policies? Or should certification of forest management remain a “voluntary market based instrument”?

¹ For further information on markets for certified forest products, see chapter 9 of the UNECE/FAO Forest Products Annual Market Review 2003-2004. Reference: ECE/TIM/BULL/2004/3; May be downloaded at: <http://www.unece.org/trade/timber/docs/fpama/2004/fpama2004a.htm>

5. One aspect of particular interest to the Working Party is that the certification systems put in place for the certification of sustainable forest management have largely been independent of existing and well tried systems for standardization, conformity assessment and accreditation, generally applied for most goods. Was this justified in the light of the particular circumstances of the forest sector, or was this needless duplication and institutional competition? Should governments act to bring forest certification systems into line with those for other sectors?

UNECE Timber Committee

6. At its session in October 2004, the Timber Committee approved the following on the subject of certification:

Certified forest products. Considerable discussion revolved around the evolution of certification as its policies and issues affect both forests and markets. Worldwide-certified forest area is nearing 200 million hectares, approximately 5% of the total forest area. 95% of the certified forests are in the UNECE region with greatest gains most recently in Canada with a doubling of certified area. In Russia which accounts for over 20% of the world's forests, first steps are being taken by the industry, certification schemes and the government to develop and apply certification. To date, certification has not made a significant contribution to halting tropical deforestation.

Demand for certified forest products is coming from within the wood chain, business-to-business markets, for example middlemen and retailers, and not yet from final consumers. Despite recent moves towards cooperation between certification schemes, the lack of mutual recognition between schemes threatens to confuse consumers. Chain of custody (CoC) certificates to trace forest products back to their source are increasing rapidly. There are several projects under way to assess certification schemes and increase transparency. Government procurement policies increasingly influence wood consumption and may require that wood products come from sustainably managed forests. Such policies should be neutral between credible certification schemes. A danger exists that if these procurement policies are too rigidly specified, they could limit the use of wood by public authorities, in favour of other, non-renewable, materials.

7. FAO and the UNECE secretariat are developing a proposal for a roundtable on the role of governments in forest certification. If such plans mature, it would clearly be desirable that they use the expertise of the Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies (WP.6) and that Working Party members and their colleagues participate. Such a roundtable could take place in Geneva in spring/early summer 2005.

8. The Working Party is invited:

- To discuss the issues outlined above
- To authorize its Office Bearers and Rapporteurs, in cooperation with its secretariat to work with the FAO and ECE secretariats in preparing a roundtable on the role of governments in forest certification.

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