

Group Certification

Group certification is a way for more than one forest operation to be certified under a single FSC certificate. The certificate is held by one organization or person on behalf of a group of forest owners or managers who agree to participate in the group.

Affordable Certification

All the costs involved in certification - such as report-writing, travel costs of auditors, consulting with the public about the forest management - are shared amongst the members. Also the auditors don't visit every single group member each year - only a sample of members. So the cost per member, is much cheaper than if they applied to have one certificate each.

Group certification also usually means that the group members get support from the group manager, or from each other in complying with the FSC requirements for good forest management.

How does it work?

Each group needs a person or organization that acts as the **group manager** (sometimes called the group entity). The group manager can be an individual, a company, a cooperative, an NGO - or any other legal entity.

Group members are the individual forest owners or managers. The forests they manage can be of any size, and any type of land ownership (state land, private, communal, concession etc).

Key Responsibilities in Group Certification

Group Manager's responsibilities:

- Apply for group certification.
- Act as contact point for the certification body.
- Inform the group about their responsibilities.
- Make sure that the FSC forest management requirements are being met by all group members.
- Monitor all of the group members: i.e. check that they are meeting the requirements.
- Keep records: e.g. lists of group members, forest areas, reports.

Some group managers also offer technical services such as inventories, planting, impact assessments, harvesting, marketing and sales of the forest products; however, it is not a requirement. In other groups the group manager simply administers the group scheme.

Group member responsibilities:

- Manage their forests according to the FSC requirements.
- Agree to the rules of the group scheme and agree that the group manager will apply for an FSC certificate on their behalf (e.g. by signing an agreement).

If it's not appropriate to have the agreement as written documentation - for example, because most people in the group don't read or write - then the FSC allows other options, such as verbal agreements. In this case the group manager would have to explain why written documents weren't appropriate and how the members were informed, and consented to the rules.

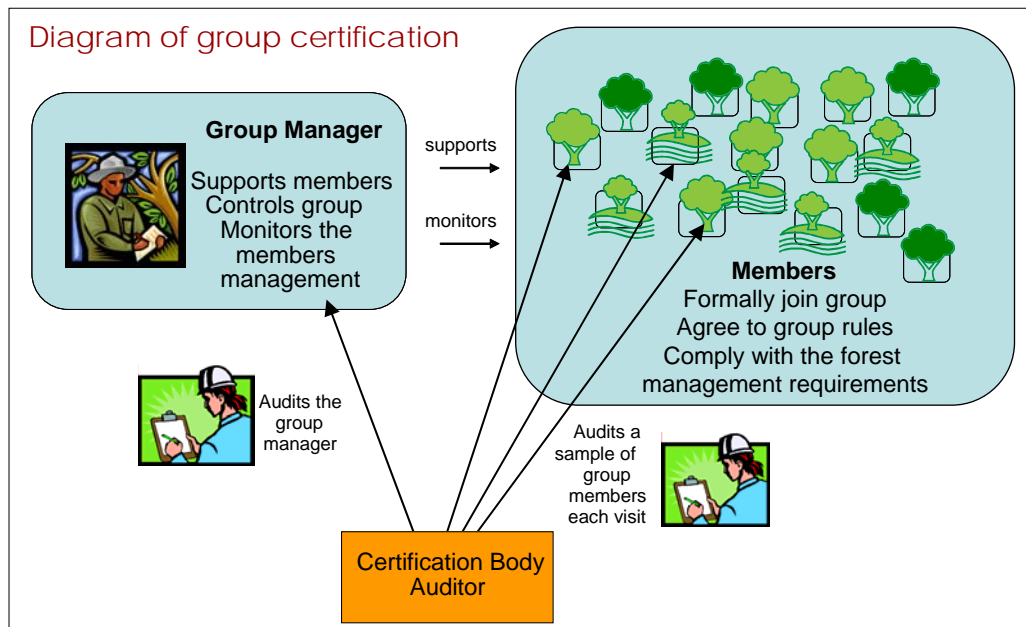
Group certification is designed to *help reduce the costs of certification* – the cost per group member is much cheaper than if they applied to have one certificate each.

Examples of Group Managers: government forestry departments, local NGOs, individual professional foresters, forest-owner associations, community forestry organizations, pulp-manufacturing companies.

There is no limit on the size of a group: it can have any number of members, and any size of forest. The group entity must show that they can manage the group size they have, and any planned growth.



Diagram of group certification



Certifying a Group

The group manager has the role of managing the group and monitoring the group members' forest management. So, FSC group certification requirements put a lot of **responsibility on the group manager** for checking that all the group members are carrying out good forest management. The certifiers will check that the group manager is doing this properly and has procedures in place to monitor its group. They will also visit a selection of individual group members' forests to see if they are meeting FSC requirements.

Problems with the capacity of the group management are taken very seriously. If auditors find that the group management is not keeping good records or not monitoring the group properly, they will require improvements (normally called Corrective Action Requests, or CARs), or may suspend or withdraw the group certificate.

If auditors find that an individual member is not complying with FSC requirements for forest management, they recommend that the individual be suspended or expelled from the group or they may issue requests for improvements in management, and in the way the group is monitoring its members.

Groups of Small and Low Intensity Forest Operations

If a group is made up exclusively of operations that qualify as **'small'** or **'low intensity managed' forests** (Group of 'SLIMF'), then FSC allows certification bodies to make some changes to the way they audit, in order to try to reduce costs for such operations.

Depending on whether the certifier raises many 'corrective actions' (problems which need correcting), they may be able to offer cheaper audit costs by reducing the number of member operations visited during a field audit, and by replacing some annual field audits with desk audits of documents and systems.

There is no limit on the number of members in a Group of SLIMF.

Where to find more information

Group Certification Resources Online: www.dovetailinc.org/GroupCert.html A comprehensive set of case studies, handbooks, and policies related to FSC group certification, in English.

Case Studies: www.fsc.org/smallholders 5 case studies which highlight the various benefits and challenges of group certification.

Specific documents:

- *The FSC Policy on Group Certification* [FSC-POL-20-001 (1998) EN Group Certification – FSC Guidelines for Certification Bodies]. Aimed at certification bodies, but it is also useful for people setting up groups.
- *FSC Forest Management Group Certification Guidebook*. Rainforest Alliance 2005. Includes sample documents for managing a group.
- *Group Certification for Forests: A Practical Guide*. ProForest 2002. Also has a set of model documents and templates available separately.

All of the individual forest managers need to be complying with all of the requirements in the standard. You can't "trade" responsibilities for meeting the requirements between different group members or properties. However, some aspects of good management - such as biodiversity conservation - might be suitable for management at the group level: it will depend on the group context, and organizational structure.