

American Tree Farm System

Standard Operating Procedures

for

Regional State Program Forest Owner Group Certification

ATFS: Family Forest Certification System

With the emergence of international certification endorsement programs, ATFS has been working to configure itself to meet current international endorsement requirements. Specifically, ATFS is focusing its efforts toward conformance with the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC).

The American Forest Foundation is the standard setting body for the AFF Standards of Sustainability (Appendix 1) and owns The Standard. The American Tree Farm System is a program of the American Forest Foundation and is charged with ensuring compliance of forest owners to the AFF Standard. The American Tree Farm System staff and governing committee (ATFS National Operating Committee) administer the ATFS national program. ATFS is not a standard setting body and does not accredit certification bodies.

ATFS state programs must follow the policies and guidelines as outlined in the ATFS Leadership Handbook and must complete the inspections assigned each year by VA Tech as part of the internal monitoring system to assure conformance to The Standard of their by their state's certified forest owners.

The ATFS national office and its affiliated state committees are responsible for the Standard conformance of all participating forest owners associated with state-based programs. State-based programs are divided into four groups known as 1.) Northeast Region; 2.) Southern Region; 3.) North Central Region and 4.) Western Region. (See ATFS Leadership Handbook for actual region boundaries.) All four groups are managed by the ATFS national office.

The national office is responsible for maintaining and managing the central database of certified forest properties, ownership and participating program volunteers. State committees have web access to their state-specific data and have the option of managing that data. The national office is responsible for contracting with ANAB accredited certification bodies auditing forest owner conformance to the AFF Standard through annual surveillance audits. The national office will hold all original issued certificates and will provide copies to the state committees respective to their region.

State Program Operations

State program operations and certification implementation documents are explicitly detailed in the ATFS Leadership Handbook (appropriate portions of the Handbook are attached). Each year state committee leadership are provided an updated handbook

which outlines the policies and procedures as well as provides tools needed to run the program on the state level as well as are encouraged to attend the National Leadership Conference (NLC), held each winter. The handbook defines state program committee responsibilities, organization, definitions of qualified inspecting foresters, training requirements for inspecting foresters, inspection information, data entry and record maintenance, dispute resolution processes, recognition information, communications, outreach and education, and other tools to operate the program on the state level. State committees receive financial support from the national office of ATFS.

State Committee Recruitment and Internal Monitoring Responsibilities

Each state program is responsible for designating a committee assignee (team or individual) responsible for overseeing and coordinating the initial inspection and re-inspection (follow up internal monitoring) of family forest owners into ATFS. Qualified participating foresters are responsible for conducting the initial inspections on the property of the family forest owners in the company of the forest owner. Qualified inspecting foresters may be consulting foresters, state agency foresters, industry foresters, and professional forester retirees. Inspecting foresters must meet specific requirements set by the American Tree Farm System in order to qualify to be inspecting foresters. They must also attend the ATFS Inspector Training Course and take the refresher training course every 5-years or upon implementation of revision of the Standard. Both national staff and trained facilitators conduct the ATFS Inspector Training Courses. Facilitators are state program volunteers that have taken the “Train-the-Trainer” course, given only by ATFS National Staff. The Facilitator training program and inspector training course take about 6 hours to complete. The refresher training course is designed to last 2-hours and can be taken face-to-face or online. State committees are responsible for maintaining an appropriate level of qualified and active inspecting foresters necessary to accomplish the State’s annual internal monitoring/inspection requirements.

Forest Owner Entrance Process

Initial inspections can be prompted by several means; 1.) inquiry from property owner to state committee, 2.) referral from certified forest owner, 3.) invitation from state committee member, 4.) recommendation from other parties.

Following initial contact, an inspecting forester is assigned by the state committee to visit the forest owner and conduct an on-the-ground inspection of the property. The inspecting forester undertakes a document review of the management plan and assesses its adequacy. The forester inspects the property to measure conformance to the AFF Standards of Sustainability. The inspecting forester uses the “004 Form” to record information about the property, activity, and conformance to the Standards, Performance Measures and Indicators. The 004 Form is a carbon copy form, administered and distributed out of the ATFS National Office. A copy of the form is left with the landowner, a copy with the inspecting forester, a copy for state program records, and a copy is forwarded to the ATFS National Office.

If the inspecting forester finds the property to be in conformance with The Standard, he/she signs the form, along with the property owner, and submits it to the state committee with a recommendation for incorporation into the group of certified properties. If, however, the forested property is found to be in non-conformance with The Standard, the inspecting forester will not recommend certification, but rather will recommend to the forest owner the option of becoming a Pioneer Tree Farmer, a non-certified status and allows up to five years for the forest owner to bring the property into conformance with The Standard. If the forest owner disputes the outcome of the inspection, they may initiate the ATFS dispute resolution process.

Upon receiving the signed 004 Form, state committee assigned member(s) review the form, and if all is found in conformance with procedures, signs the form, thereby adding the property to the pool of that state's certified Tree Farms. Following that, the form and its information is entered into the national database for continual monitoring purposes.

Once approved and entered into the national database, the forest owner of the certified property will receive a state committee issued "certificate" (a public relations document) stating that the forest owner has been found to be in conformance with the AFF Standard. In addition, the forest owner will receive a sign to be posted by the owner to demonstrate to the community that the forest owner's property is in conformance with the AFF Standard.

Internal Monitoring

Internal monitoring of certified properties is another state committee responsibility. This assures the national office and the public a strong pattern of conformance to The Standard.

At the beginning of each calendar year, ATFS contracts with Virginia Tech University to run a stratified random sample of all appropriate and eligible properties in the ATFS data base. This sample generates a nationally random list of properties to be visited during the calendar year. This sample gives a level of accuracy of 95 percent, +/- 5 percent. The national office then generates a 004 Form for each property selected and forwards those to their respective states. It is the state committee's responsibility to distribute these forms to their qualified inspecting foresters and monitor their accomplishment.

It is the responsibility of the inspecting forester to conduct an on-the-ground inspection of the property. The inspecting forester undertakes a document review of the management plan and assesses its adequacy. The forester inspects the property to measure conformance to the AFF Standards of Sustainability. The inspecting forester uses the "004 Form" to record information about the property, activity, and conformance to the Standards, Performance Measures and Indicators. The 004 Form is a carbon copy form, administered and distributed out of the ATFS National Office. The inspecting forester is then responsible for leaving a copy of the form with the landowner, keeping a copy for his/her records and submitting two copies for state program records. The state program is responsible keeping a copy and has the option of forwarding one to the national office.

If the inspecting forester finds the property to be conformance to The Standard, he/she signs the form, along with the property owner, and submits it to the state committee with a recommendation for certification. If, however, the forested property is found to be in non-conformance with The Standard, the inspecting forester will recommend decertification. If the forest owner disputes the outcome of the inspection, they may initiate the ATFS dispute resolution process. If the forest owner does not dispute the decertification, the forest owner is eligible to correct the non-conformance and contact the state committee, or inspecting forester, to resubmit the property for certification. There is no time limit for this process.

Upon receiving the signed 004 Form, state committee assigned member(s) review the form, and if all is found in conformance with procedures, signs the form. Following that, the state committee is responsible for entering the form and its information into the national database for continual monitoring purposes, thereby adding the property to the pool of that state's certified Tree Farms.

State committees are also responsible for their full cooperation with ANAB accredited certification bodies as addressed in ANAB ATFS Accreditation Rule.