



# Group Certification: The key to family forest certification

by Jeff Stringer

**A**t one time, forest certification was a costly endeavor in both time and money. However, certification systems, including both the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), recognize the importance of family-owned woodlands and have developed “group certification” to bring the cost of certification down to manageable levels or, in some cases to be free of charge.

## How Groups Work

To become certified, a woodland owner has to have a written management plan that includes the stipulations set forth in a certification system’s standards. For those of you who are Tree Farmers, through ATFS, your plans meet ATFS standards. Further, you are inspected periodically, for Tree Farmers this inspection is typically done at least once every five years. This inspection by a Tree Farm inspector is what sets you apart from woodland owners who have a Forest Stewardship Plan but are not Tree Farm members. HOWEVER, this inspection does not make your Tree Farm certified. What makes you certified is that the ATFS itself is audited by an independent third party, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLC (PwC) to ensure that the ATFS is conducting itself according to its own rules and regulations and that Tree Farmers are managing to the ATFS standards. FSC is relatively new compared to the ATFS and has not had a historic group of landowners to work with. Therefore, FSC has to have interested individual consulting foresters, forest industries, associations, or organizations to develop a group and be the “group manager.” Examples of organizations that serve as group managers are the Center for Forest and Wood Certification (CFWC) based in Kentucky which serves a

large region and the Alabama Treasure Forest Association that has formed an FSC group. Many times, as is the case with the CFWC woodland owners are certified through both ATFS and FSC. In some states, such as Wisconsin or Indiana, the state forestry agency has formed what is informally called a “super group” out of everyone in its forest tax programs.

## Certification Costs

This independent third party audit costs money. If you had to bear this cost yourself, it would easily cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000 for this independent audit team

to come to your woodlands and determine if you are upholding the standards. Groups allow costs to be distributed among a large number of members, thus keeping individual fees low. In the instance of some groups run by state agencies, industry, or the ATFS, the organizations are often bearing all of the cost of certification for the individual woodland owner.

Group membership is the path for family woodlands certification. While groups take on many forms, sizes, and organizational structures, they all do basically the same thing. They organize woodland owners and administrate all the aspects of certification to minimize the work and cost for the individual owner.

Without the group concept, certification of family-owned woodlands would be out of reach for most woodland owners. If you are interested in certification, contact your local state, industry, or consulting forester.

## About the Author:

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*Woodland owners that are interested in participating in forest certification programs should strongly consider joining a certification group. Group managers assist woodland owners in navigating certification requirements, reducing costs, and helping them see the forest through the trees.*

Photo courtesy: Doug McLaren