

# What These Forestry Labels Really Mean

You've seen FSC and SFI labels on wood products. Most often, you've seen no label at all. Here's a green guide to each one.

Standards for forestry products are complicated: they cover not only the management of the forest itself but also the handling of the raw materials all along the supply chain. This *chain-of-custody* tracking helps ensure that non-certified wood does not get mixed in with—or replace—certified wood in the final product.

TRANSPARENCY: **A**  
RIGOR: **A**



The label says it all: 100% of this product was harvested from Forest Stewardship Council-certified forests. The operant word in this standard's name is "stewardship," reflecting a core mission of **conserving natural forest ecosystems**.

- On-the-ground auditing
- Chain-of-custody tracking
- Publicly available management plans
- Science-driven decision-making and monitoring
- Regionally sensitive treatment of ecosystems
- Protection of indigenous peoples' rights
- Fair employment practices
- Consideration of other industries that rely on a healthy forest
- Conservation of habitat
- Strict limits on pesticide use
- Prohibition of genetically modified trees
- Consultation with local experts about high-conservation-value forests
- Strict limits on conversion of forests to non-forests

There are a couple of ways that companies are allowed to use the FSC Mix label. For simplicity's sake we'll explain the proportional method: if a mill is producing plywood with 70% FSC-certified wood content, then only 70% of the plywood coming off the mill gets the FSC Mix label. The other 30% gets no label at all. FSC requires a minimum of 70% FSC-certified forest content or post-consumer recycled content for this label to appear. The other 30% can be FSC Controlled Wood from "acceptable" sources. **Purchasing FSC Mix supports FSC-certified forestry**, but since the two kinds of wood are mixed, a product that receives the FSC Mix label may not be the actual FSC-certified wood.

The FSC Controlled Wood standard requires tracking to ensure any wood mixed with FSC-certified content comes from acceptable sources. It involves:

- Legal harvesting
- Traditional and civil rights
- Protection of high-conservation-value forest
- Prohibition on plantations replacing forests
- Prohibition of genetically modified trees

TRANSPARENCY: **B-**  
RIGOR: **B**



This label indicates that the content was harvested from SFI-certified forests (or forests certified under similar programs recognized by SFI). The SFI Forestry Standard itself has many of the same elements as FSC, but its requirements are less prescriptive, companies are less transparent about their practices, and audits are arguably less rigorous. Much is **left to the forester's discretion**.

The SFI Forestry Standard encourages:

- On-the-ground auditing
- Chain-of-custody tracking
- Forest and soil productivity
- Some limits on converting natural forests to plantations
- Preservation of water quality
- Some protections for threatened and endangered species
- Conservation of adjacent and downstream habitats
- Some limits on pesticide use
- Prohibition of genetically modified trees
- Limitations on clearcuts that disrupt visual quality
- Measures to minimize waste

The SFI Certified Sourcing label is problematic: it looks very similar to the SFI Chain of Custody Label, and includes the reassuring words "sustainable" and "certified sourcing," but it is **only a shadow of the SFI Forest Management Standard**, which is in turn less rigorous than the FSC standard. Based on the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard, the label requires manufacturers that don't manage forests but do purchase fiber—such as producers of manufactured wood products and paper—to have certain advocacy and education policies.

- Programs promoting biological diversity
- Policies addressing best management practices, to be shared with fiber suppliers
- Programs to promote the hire of qualified logging professionals
- Compliance with logging laws
- Financial or in-kind support of forestry research
- Staff training on the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard
- Community education and outreach
- Programs designed to prevent purchase of fiber from controversial sources

TRANSPARENCY: **F**  
RIGOR: **D**



## Local or trackable?

The lack of a forestry label **could mean anything**. You could be dealing with a family-owned logging operation that exceeds FSC standards but hasn't paid to get certified. Or not: the lumber could be traced back to mineral extraction or to other poor forest management practices such as over-harvesting. State laws provide some basic protections but they vary widely. The only way to know what you're dealing with is to find out where the wood came from and learn about their forest practices, using the FSC standard as a guide.

TRANSPARENCY: **F**  
RIGOR: **?**



## Untrackable?

If the wood or fiber isn't labeled and isn't trackable, **assume the worst**. Lumber from forests clearcut to make way for strip mining, development, or exploitation of important ecosystems could be involved. These activities occur all around the world, even in the U.S. and Canada, and there is a market for the timber that is generated. Wood products originating from such sources have no place in a green building.

To read more about how forestry standards compare, see our report. [www.BuildingGreen.com/forestry](http://www.BuildingGreen.com/forestry)

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