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Linking sustainable forest management to timber sourcing decisions and policies

Introduction Session

Paper by Mr David Bills,
Director General, Forestry Commission of Great Britain, the United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

The use of wood in construction can have many environmental advantages but it is important the wood comes from legal harvesting operations in well-managed forests. Otherwise in solving one problem we may well be creating another.

If we are to promote all the advantages of wood to the end user then we must be able to provide evidence that the wood they purchase is from sustainably managed forests.

The paper outlines the emerging concern of the global community over sustainable forest management and illegal logging. The United Kingdom is a major importer of timber and other forest products and the UK Government recognises it has a responsibility to consider the impact this demand has on forest management and the forest products trade beyond the United Kingdom. However before it can act it has had to get its own house in order.

The paper discusses work done in the United Kingdom to provide a credible certification system and argues that certification systems for home grown and imported wood are going to play an important role in influencing consumer and specified choice in the UK, not only in terms of what wood is used but in encouraging the use of wood – an environmentally compatible material – in place of other materials.

1. INTRODUCTION

I am sure this meeting will cover many of the advantages of using wood; in construction as fibre or as fuel.

A rough and ready classification of these benefits could be:

Technical	-	Engineering solutions, thermal efficiency, aesthetic	design
Economic	-	Speed of erection, flexibility, off-site assembly available skills	
Environmental	-	Renewability, embedded energy, carbon sequestration, recyclability	
Social	-	Aesthetically pleasing, design flexibility	

To complete the picture there is a need to consider the potential consequences of sourcing the raw material and the costs of disposal that is a complete life cycle analysis. Many of these concepts will be dealt with elsewhere in the Conference. This paper focuses primarily on issues relating to sourcing wood. In doing so it makes the link with sustainable forest management.

2. THE PROBLEM

The fundamental question that needs to be asked is:

Has the timber come from a forest that is being managed sustainably? To manage sustainably means far more than just replanting the trees that are harvested. Other questions have to be considered:

- Is the logging consistent with the law of the land? (laws can either be willfully broken or, in some countries where there is insufficient capacity, not enforced);
- Is the site being managed in such a way as to conserve the long-term productivity, for example, soil and water conservation?
- Are important ecosystems and/or rare and endangered species being threatened?
- Have local communities been displaced or otherwise had their life disrupted?
- Has the labour employed been treated with dignity and given appropriate support in terms of payment, occupational health and safety?

To use timber without knowing the answers to these questions might create one problem while solving another.

The fact is today many of the world's forest ecosystems are under threat.

In December 2001 the Secretary General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development produced a review of progress achieved in implementing the UN Conference on Environment and Development (commonly called the Rio Earth Summit). The forest section of the report is particularly bleak. In summary, the text states that forests are of great importance to people worldwide – socially, economically and environmentally - but little progress has been made in tackling the high rate of deforestation in developing countries and although in some regions, notably Europe, forest biomass and area has increased, there is a net loss of area and biomass on a global scale. Moreover, much of what is being lost involves primary or mature natural forests, often providing unique habitats for rare and endangered species of flora and fauna. At Johannesburg it was reported tropical forests are being lost at the rate of 35 million acres per year. That is 1.7 times the area of Scotland or about 75% of the UK.

I should make it clear that it is not just the timber trade which is causing forest loss and degradation - activities associated with land clearing for cash crops, subsistence agriculture and intensive fuel wood gathering contribute to a greater share of the problem than does logging for timber without sustainable forest management.

But the timber trade, which has become increasingly globalised, is very much on the agenda with perhaps most interest being directed at the illegal timber trade. This has been a topic all governments have been able to buy into as it robs them of revenues which often fund other illegal activities. It has been estimated that 15% of the global trade in timber and timber products is illegal. But then there are also logging operations which, although sanctioned by the relevant authority, are clearly unsustainable and often within important and diminishing forest ecosystems.

3. THIRD PARTY INDEPENDENT CERTIFICATION

To counter this there has also been a rise in the interest and practice of forest and timber certification. This has been particularly true of the UK which, along with the USA and Japan, make up the top three importing countries.

Certification is one way of providing assurance to the consumer of the finished product that their purchasing decision is not supporting illegal and unsustainable forestry practices. There are a number of certification systems in operation and unfortunately there is danger of confusion as the schemes compete for the attention of the trade. I do not want to get into the debate over the relative merits of the schemes other than to say there are a number of good ones, none of which are perfect, but the Forestry Stewardship Council scheme which enjoys the most support from environmental organisations has the greatest universal recognition and is the scheme of choice for most in the UK trade.

Forest certification involves a detailed audit at the forest management unit level to answer those broad questions I posed at the beginning of this presentation. To be effective in giving assurance of sustainable forest management a certification system must have three elements:

1. A forest management standard based on the fundamental principles of sustainable forest management against which the actual forest management system being applied to a specific forest can be audited. An sustainable forest management standard goes beyond a standard which involves the maintenance of the productivity of the forest. A standard will require compliance with the law of the land, a respect for cultural heritage and the rights of contemporary indigenous people. It will require the maintenance of existing access arrangements and that those who are employed in forest activities are treated fairly and with dignity. But this only certifies the log to the forest edge or perhaps to the mill. There is also a need to audit the chain of custody.

2. An auditable chain of custody that ensures products from sustainable forests are indeed those which the consumer purchases so the supply chain must also be certified. This is more complex than might be assumed. Once the log is harvested there needs to be a system in place which ensures that when it reaches a sawmill it is not 'lost' amongst non-certified wood and when the finished piece of wood, which has been seasoned and shaped, leaves the mill it is not lost within other supplies of, for example, a furniture maker who might be buying wood from dozens of suppliers and when that manufacturer's product arrives at the wholesaler then the retailer etc, etc.

3. The third element is the existence of a credible independent authority, who accredits the certifiers or assessors and who owns a label that is well recognised, promoted and trusted. This has been the strength of the FSC against the various industry certification schemes which, although I know many to be of greater quality, simply don't have the credibility of the FSC scheme which is actively supported by the Worldwide Fund for Nature and others.

Of course, certification is not the answer to all our problems. There is much wood imported into the UK from well-managed forests that is not certified. There is a lack of capacity within the certification system to arrive quickly at a position where wood from well-managed forests is certified. Furthermore, wood from some developing countries is coming from quite well-managed forests but the institutions, the systems, the documentation and the chain of custody are not in a form or not well enough developed to be certified. This poses a dilemma. Not to use this wood would penalise a developing country and to use a non-wood substitute could penalise the environment. Loss of markets for wood from well-managed but uncertified forests would result in the forest "losing the value" and not being cared for. It might result in deforestation to grow cash crops.

4. THE GROWING DEMAND FOR CERTIFICATION

Questions often asked are - who is it that wants the assurance that the wood is from a sustainably managed forest? Is there really a market for it? It is true that at the far end of the consumer chain whereas there is evidence of preference for garden furniture or perhaps a wooden spoon to have a respected label demonstrated by a significant minority of consumers, when it comes to timber or panel purchase for "Do it Yourself" purposes they inevitably buy on price and convenience. However, there are many distributors and retailers who are using their muscle in the UK as part of the Kingfisher plc group, and demonstrating preference for eco-labelling. The best-known example is B&Q who apply a philosophy of corporate civic responsibility to all their purchasing. They do so, they say, because their shareholders, employees and customers want it that way. In the UK it is estimated that the 95-Plus Buyers' Group, which has started a preference for FSC labeled timber, account for as much as 30% of the UK timber and forest product trade.

Moving further down the value chain we can anticipate more and more of the specifiers (local authorities, architects and engineers) taking more interest in the provenance of their timber purchases. This interest will be generated from a number of sources. Professional associations demonstrating civic responsibility, Government guidelines for eco-friendly purchasing and the Government requirement for Government funded purchasers will all have their effect. We can also reasonably anticipate that a better-educated and increasingly wealthy community continually exposed by the media to problems of climate change, forest degradation and species loss will take an increasing interest in doing their bit as consumers. As you know, skilful advertising will promote these issues and demonstrate how peoples' consumption decisions can be improved to minimise impact on the environment. Indeed this has been very much the thrust of the UK *wood.for good* media campaigns targeted at opinion leaders and consumers. Their advertisements have produced well-researched and attributed information on carbon sequestration, life cycle and embedded energy issues and sustainable forest management issues.

You will notice throughout this presentation I have been talking of wood from unsustainable sources and wood from illegal operations. I don't mean to use these terms interchangeably; there is a difference. Logging from unsustainable sources may well be sanctioned by the Government of the country involved and it can be many years before some countries which are dependent upon income from timber can achieve a level of sustainable practice and documented process which will satisfy certification requirements. This needs to be dealt with sensitively within the world community and it is important that importing countries have their own house in order and are prepared to provide appropriate incentives and assistance to the exporting country who may not have the capacity to achieve or prove their credentials relating to sustainable forest management. Illegal logging – while by definition not sustainable is far more serious – it damages more than the environment. It lines the pockets of criminals at the expense of honest workers, traders and communities. It is often associated

with other destructive activities – it is in the immediate interests of all Government to tackle illegal logging.

5. THE UK GOVERNMENT POSITION

The UK Government recognises that it has an important role to play in combating illegal logging and promoting sustainable forest management both at home and abroad. It is in an influential position through its trade and historical links with countries where illegal logging is a problem and through its membership of the European Union and the G8.

According to the UNECE/FAO Trade statistics for 2000 the UK is the fourth largest net importer of forest products (by value) in the world. The public sector, including both central and local Government, consumes approximately 20% of those imports.

In July 2000 the Government made a unilateral declaration that for Government procurement it would actively seek to purchase timber and timber products from legal and sustainable sources. After a slow start we have taken steps to speed up implementation of the policy. In the coming months we will let the final part of a consultancy to prepare detailed criteria for assessing forest certification schemes and other forms of credible evidence, and for an advisory body to carry out these assessments.

We will make clear to suppliers of timber products that we will prefer products that are independently verified as coming from legally logged and sustainably managed sources. Where necessary we will still accept timber products that are legally logged and those that come from forests where credible steps are being taken to achieve sustainability, but we intend to phase these out so that all our purchases meet our criteria.

We recognise, however, that multilateral action is best and that, while a lead in Government procurement is important, much more needs to be done about timber trade in general. Working with partners in the EU and G8 we are seeking to help address the failures in governance and policy, and market failures that cause and sustain illegal logging. This means:

- improving the understanding of the causes and solutions to illegal logging and associated trade;
- communicating this understanding effectively to maintain political will, build a momentum for change and widen the base of support for action;
- promoting a coherent UK, EU and G8 policy and regulatory framework;
- helping to develop tools and systems to tackle illegal logging and associated trade, and;
- supporting regional policy processes that lay the foundations for delivering reforms.

Although these developments focus initially on the significant challenge of illegal logging, we see them as a first step towards achieving sustainability. In the next few months we expect the European Commission to present a proposal for EU action to combat illegal logging.

Also, on the local front, the British Timber Trade Federation has worked with the Government to promulgate a code of conduct to apply to its membership and has negotiated an agreement with Indonesian exporters supported by their Government, which should go some way towards controlling illegal logging. We expect to see more of these agreements emerge as importers respond to the requirements of their customers.

6. THE UK FORESTRY PARTNERSHIP FOR ACTION

All of these activities and others are being carried forward in a partnership. The UK Forestry Partnership for Action, made up of WWF, RSPB, Woodland Trust, the UK forest growers and the processing industry, the Timber Trade Federation, the retailers Kingfisher plc and the UK Government. The partnership was announced at the WSD Summit in Johannesburg this year. The message was that the UK has got its house in order with its domestic forestry industry and is taking the lead to control trade in products from illegal operations. Certification was promoted as important in linking the consumer to environmentally sound purchasing decisions. The UK partnership will continue to promote this message.

The UK Forestry Partnership for Action is also developing an international partnership on forest restoration, building on the UK's experience of nearly 100 years of restoring forests. The global initiative aims to integrate biological diversity conservation and sustainable use, contributing to the implementation of the work programmes of the UN Forum on Forests, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and other international programmes.

7. CONCLUSION

So to summarise: you have heard today that wood – a traditional material - can be used in modern ways as a high performance construction material. Wood is an environmentally compatible material with a positive role in carbon storage and with low embedded energy. Building systems using wood frame are thermally efficient. Moreover, wood is generally recyclable, non-toxic and biodegradable.

I know of no other building material that can compete with all these benefits.

And if it comes from a forest managed sustainably then it will be part of a sustainable system providing wood and a range of other benefits increasingly valued by the consumer. One way of ensuring the wood is from sustainable forests is to seek wood which has been certified under a respected certification scheme. But not all wood from well managed forests is or will be certified

and there probably will always be a need for purchasers and specifiers to have an intelligent and well-informed approach to their choice of timber. It would be a pity if uncertainty of the source or origin of wood influenced specifiers to favour non-wood substitutes which themselves pose environmental problems.

Wood might be considered an old-fashioned, traditional construction material but it is a material which will, I believe, come of age in this next decade as it is increasingly recognised as an environmentally compatible material with a great potential to solve many of the problems of the world – but always, with the important caveat, that it must come from well managed forests.

CONTACT ON AUTHOR:

Mr. David Bills, Director General, UK Forestry Commission, david.bills@forestry.gsi.gov.uk