

Green wood

CAFNR professor researches environmentally certified forest products

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Everyone is in favor of going green. But how much more will the average consumer pay to help the environment?

Francisco Aguilar (<http://snr.missouri.edu/forestry/faculty/aguilar-f.php>), assistant professor in forestry at the University of Missouri College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, is finding out.

Through investigations over the last 10 years, he is learning what consumers are willing to spend on environmentally certified wood and paper products that adhere to strict sustainability and biodiversity production practices.

His data are useful for Missouri foresters considering certification efforts. According to a study by the Louisiana State University's School of Natural Resources, certification can increase a forester's production costs by 5-25 percent.

Greener trees

Forest certification, indicated by logos on furniture labels and magazine mastheads, has its roots in the concern over rapid tropical deforestation that occurred in the 1970s.

The first formal certification showing that a forest was grown and harvested in an environmentally sustainable way was the German Blue Eco Angel program created in 1977. Since then, several other programs have emerged, and about 7.5 percent of forests worldwide have received some sort of certification.

In the North American wood-products industry, the Forest Stewardship Council (<http://www.fscus.org/>) (FSC) and Sustainable Forestry Initiative (<http://www.sfiprogram.org/>) (SFI) certifications are the most popular.

“The next time you receive your bank statement, shop in a do-it-yourself store, pick up orange juice at the store or read a magazine, look carefully and see if you can find logos with FSC or SFI initials,” Aguilar said. “The goals of these programs are to establish a global system for certifying that products come from forests that are environmentally managed, socially beneficial and economically viable.”

In certified forests, landowners replace harvested trees and protect the biodiversity of the ecosystem. To obtain a FSC or SFI label, foresters and the wood-products industry must monitor certified timber at every stage of transport, conversion and processing, from forest to consumer. Adhering to this system usually means keeping separate inventories of certified and non-certified products, which increases the material-handling cost, tracking expenditures and certification fees.



The bottom line of going green

Aguilar says a better understanding of purchasing preferences is a key to promoting sustainable consumption patterns. A former British Council Scholar, he has received awards from the Earth Island Institute, World Resources Institute, Resources for the Future and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in the U.S. Originally from Ecuador, he has experience working in the Americas, Asia and Europe. His work has appeared in *Forestry Policy and Economics*, *Journal of Forestry*, *Forest Products Journal* and will be published in the *Proceedings of the XIIIth United Nations' World Forestry Conference*.

One of Aguilar's studies used data collected from 1995 to 2005 showing the willingness of residential U.S. consumers to pay a premium for certified wood products. He found a strong relationship between respondent income and willingness to pay a premium; more affluent buyers are more likely to seek out certified products.

Roughly 93 percent of all consumers surveyed indicated that they would like their furniture and paper products to be from a sustainably managed forest. Almost 70 percent said that they would be willing to pay more. Those willing to pay more would accept a premium of 12 percent for certified products over non-certified alternatives. Aguilar also found out that consumers who have purchased certified products have a greater likelihood of purchasing such products again.

Growing opportunities

Forest certification programs are quickly gaining acceptance worldwide, Aguilar said. With them come new business opportunities.

"For example, innovative voluntary efforts to reduce climate change, such as the [Chicago Climate Exchange](http://www.chicagoclimatex.com/) (<http://www.chicagoclimatex.com/>), will allow forest landowners to be paid for the carbon fixed in their trees," Aguilar said. "Entrepreneurs are appearing to inform and organize landowners, conducting audits and helping in the development of carbon contracts, among other practices. "

The growing field of forest certification may also mean more opportunities for forestry students.

"Graduates with a firm understanding of new business-management practices will be a valuable commodity for large wood-products firms, local forestry companies or forest business consultants," he said. "In a warming world where market-based initiatives like carbon trading program are at the edge of innovation, a degree in forestry is an increasingly appealing idea."

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