Status Report on the Review and Ballot of the Australian Forestry Standard

Ross Peacock, ESA Representative to the Australian Forestry Standard Technical Reference Committee
rpeacock@rna.bio.mq.edu.au

Forest certification is emerging internationally as the main tool to assess whether forests and plantations are being managed sustainably in developed countries, or to assess progress towards sustainability in developing countries. Certification provides users of forest products with a statement of how the forest is managed relative to a benchmark standard, and provides a market advantage to products derived from certified defined forest areas. Certification relies on the use of broadly accepted standards, the use of independent auditors to verify and monitor compliance with the defined standards of forest management, and the use of product labelling systems to identify that the purchased timber product has been sourced from a sustainably managed forest and tracked through the supply chain to ensure it maintains an unbroken chain of custody. The Australian Forestry Standard is currently the only nationally developed forest management standard for native forest and plantations and is now widely applied by forest owners, State forest agencies and forest companies. The ESA has been closely associated with the revision of the Interim Standard since 2004 and has been asked to formally vote on the proposed revised criteria and requirements. This status report summarises the last three years activities by the Society on the Australian Forestry Standard Technical Reference Committee and describes the process for the ESA to engage in the ballot on the proposed revised Standard. The major ecological developments promoted during the review process by the Society include an expanded definition of significant biological diversity values, the cessation of broad scale land clearing for plantation conversion, an offset regime for small scale conversion and criteria for identifying altered or degraded land.

Background to ESA input

The Australian Forestry Standard (AFS) was developed between 1999 and 2002 to apply community values and the science of forest management to identify the economic, social, environmental and indigenous criteria that are most important for assessing whether a forest is well-managed. The aim in developing an Australian Forestry Standard is to provide a basis for credible, verifiable statements on the sustainability of forest management for wood production from individual forest ownerships (see http://www.forestrystandard.org.au/). The Standard was approved by Standards Australia as an interim Standard in 2003. It has subsequently been subject to three years of review since 2004 and is currently being tested by ballot by the Technical Reference Committee. If approved by this ballot, it will be recognised by Standards Australia as a full Standard. The ESA was invited in November 2003 to participate in the AFS Technical Reference Committee, and along with Greening Australia accepted this invitation in mid 2004. The twenty member Technical Reference Committee comprises independent professional and scientific experts; forest owners and processors; community and consumer interests; and regulatory or controlling bodies. It does not currently have environmental non-government organisational representation, the ENGO groups who participated in the early stages of the development of the interim Standard withdrew due to concerns about the structure and inclusiveness of the previous Technical Reference Committee (FERN 2004).

The role of the Technical Reference Committee is to guide the development of, and approve, the technical content of the AFS. In 2004 when the ESA engaged directly in the development of the AFS, it was already operating as an interim Standard and the brief of the Technical Reference Committee was to review public submissions and advise on the further development of the technical content. The development process for the Australian Forestry

Standard is complex, and is guided by the procedures determined Standards Australia as a Standards Development Organisation (see http://www.forestrystandard.org.au/files/DevelopmentProcess.doc). The key issue for this status report is the position to be adopted by the ESA membership during the ballot. The formal postal vote ballot and concurrent public consultation is being conducted from 15th May 2007 to 20th June 2007.

ESA input to the Technical Reference Committee

The ESA exists on the Technical Reference Committee as a scientific organisation with a brief to foster the science of ecology and the adoption of ecological principles in relation to rational management of land and other natural resources. The Societies input is guided by the existing policy position statements and views of the membership. This input has focussed on improving the ecological concepts and definitions in the Standard and to this extent has been successful in influencing the revision process. Input by the ESA has been particularly influential on the difficult issues of forest conversion and the assessment of significant biological diversity values. Much of this input has been consistent and complementary to advice provided within the Technical Reference Committee by the independent environmental scientist (Dr Brendan Wintle, School of Botany University of Melbourne) and the independent forestry scientist (Dr David Flinn). Much of the background to the ESA input to the Technical Reference Committee has been provided previously (Peacock and Wintle 2006, Peacock 2006, Wintle and Peacock 2006).

The proposed revised Standard

The process which the ESA engaged in (from 2004 onwards) was a revision of those components of the interim Standard, published in 2003, which had been identified from public and other submissions as requiring additional consideration. It was not a complete revision or re-write of the 2003 version. The major areas of input all concerned Criterion 3 - the protection and maintenance the forest biological diversity. The four main components subject to extensive discussion within the Technical Reference Committee was the expansion of the definition of significant biological diversity values, the new limits on broad scale conversion, defining the scope of altered or degraded land which may be converted to plantation, and the definition of an offsetting regime for small scale conversion.

Significant Biological Diversity Values

The Standard requires that significant biological diversity values are identified, assessed, maintained and protected. Proposed changes to the interim Standard extend the definition of significant biological diversity values in several ways. The reference in the interim Standard to threatened forest ecosystems has been expanded to include regionally significant ecosystems or ecological communities, and the term ‘forest’ is removed so non-forest (eg grassland, heathland, woodland) ecosystems and ecological communities are included. The interim Standard reference to the assessment and protection of old growth forest is no longer restricted to circumstances where it is assessed as being viable and rare or depleted within a forest ecosystem. The assessment and protection of the important habitat of threatened species is now expanded to include the important habitat of regionally significant species.

Plantation Conversion

Conversion is the clearing or native vegetation to plantation or non-native vegetation cover. The interim Standard certifies broad scale conversion where the bioregional impacts of conversion are considered and significant biological diversity values are protected and maintained. It also certifies conversion in some jurisdictions where it is consistent with Commonwealth-State Government agreements which place thresholds or upper limits on the

proportion of regional forest types than can be cleared. The proposed revision to the Standard changes this criteria significantly, so that broad scale conversion ceases to be certified after December 31 2006. The proposed revised Standard makes a very clear statement on this issue – 'Native vegetation conversion is no longer considered best practice and should cease.' Small scale conversion is still permitted, as is the case with most State and Territory based controls on land clearance, provided it does not exceed ten per cent of, and up to a limit of forty hectares on a single forest management unit. Where small scale conversion is undertaken, it must be matched with an appropriate offset.

Offset criteria

Offsets provide an opportunity for a net gain in biodiversity in the landscape to compensate for the biodiversity loss from small scale clearing. Small scale clearing is now required to be evaluated against an offset mechanism which effectively balances the environmental outcomes of the conversion for relevant environmental values. Offsets need to be based on clear and transparent risk assessment criteria and appropriate technical expertise. Three environmental values need to be addressed by the offset criteria; vegetation conservation status, vegetation landscape value and vegetation site quality and extent. The introduction of offset criteria to balance the environmental outcomes of small scale clearing aligns the Standard with the types of vegetation management regulations implemented in most Australian State and Territory jurisdictions.

Altered or degraded land

Altered or degraded land is land with native vegetation which is unlikely to be viable in the long-term under current management and is proposed to be converted to plantation. The proposed revised Standard defines a process to identify altered or degraded land and then apply an offset regime that improves the long-term viability of other native vegetation. This section was developed specifically to define a standard for plantation conversion where there was some ambiguity in the interim Standard concerning the conversion of native vegetation recovering from fire or other perturbations such as drought, flood or disease.

The Ballot

The ESA, as a member of the Australian Forestry Standard Technical Reference Committee, is required to formally participate in the current ballot process. The Society is being asked to either vote in favour of the proposed revised Standard, or alternately register a negative vote (with supporting reasons for rejection) so the processes of resolution can be instigated. The processes of resolution in effect involve the Technical Reference Committee re-opening negotiations on the draft text of the Standard. The ESA has already indicated it is prepared to proceed to ballot and consult broadly with the membership on the basis of the final draft.

The ballot forms a package of several documents, including the criteria document and associated guidance material which totals 228 pages. While I would not recommend members of the Society attempt to read the whole package, elements of the criteria and guidance material which address the four main components summarised above can be provided electronically for review. **The opinions of the ESA membership are therefore sought up to 18th June 2007 on the ballot material, especially criterion 3 - the protection and maintenance the forest biological diversity.** On the basis of a compilation of those opinions, a recommendation will be provided to the ESA Executive on how the Society should vote in the ballot.

Summary

While the proposed revised Standard is not the only statement of what best practice forest management should aim for in Australia [the Forest Stewardship Council International Standard (FSC 2000) is also applied by several large organisations and additionally some organisations plan to apply both FSC and AFS) and national and State forest management reporting has generally followed the criteria and indicators developed under the Montreal Process (Commonwealth of Australia 1998), at the finalisation of the ballot it will be the most contemporary and progressive of those available, especially with respect to identifying the limits to plantation conversion and the use of statistical power in monitoring performance against the Standard.

Certification is now an established part of many organisations sustainability reporting and their process for setting and improving their environmental standards. Overseas experience suggests certification primarily operates as an assurance system or signal of risk sensitivity and strategy, and less in terms of providing a market advantage or a knowledge transfer learning mechanism (Overdevest and Rickenbach 2006). Conjecture still surrounds the actual price advantage paid for certified log products (Lagan and Kollert 2007), and debate will continue over which certification system is the most appropriate or confers greatest market advantage or public assurance of sustainable management. The current ballot is not the only opportunity for the ESA to have significant input into the Standards development process, as continual review and improvement will be an on-going requirement.

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