

FLOPEN forest group certification scheme in Portugal

This Portuguese case describes how multiple, small, privately owned forests in the Coimbra Region achieved certification where there was no prior history of application of silvicultural planning or operations and much initial scepticism about certification. FLOPEN (Grupo de Gestão Florestal da FLOPEN) was the first multiple-ownership, micro-properties group scheme to be certified in Portugal. With no national precedent to learn from, challenges have been met through a combination of forming strategic partnerships and the innovative development of management planning tools.

Background

The predominantly temperate and semi-natural forests of the Coimbra Region in Central Portugal are made up of very small properties (typically < 2 ha) which are privately owned. With years of forest properties being bought, sold and divided through inheritance, information held centrally is often outdated and incorrect. This in turn has resulted in: 1) a general lack of silvicultural planning & intervention, and 2) the degradation of both landscape level natural features (eg: riparian corridors and native habitats) and a functional infrastructure for controlling forest fires. Overall the region suffers from low productivity and low market values for raw material.



A view of micro-forests owned by FLOPEN members.

Initial Challenges

Although FLOPEN group members were committed to FSC certification, it was simply not possible to comply with all the Principles & Criteria on such small scale operations, particularly the requirements for establishing conservation areas. As this was the first group scheme to be certified in Portugal, there was a great deal of scepticism that it “couldn’t be done” on multiple-ownership micro-properties and there was no national precedent to learn from or simulate.

There was also some resistance to certification in the face of the transparency requirements for Chain of

Custody certification. Timber was usually sold standing to a forest contractor who then resold it to mills on delivery. The forest owners were never aware of prices that the traders were obtaining from mills, or how these compared with prices they were setting for their raw material. Furthermore, many contractors were not FSC-certified and were breaking the chain of custody.

“we have showed our members that they earn more by being in the group than not in the group, not only in terms of sales but also in having a close technical collaboration which raises the profitability of the forest management activities”

João Ribiera, Executive Director, FLOPEN

Achieving Group Certification

In conjunction with SA Woodmark, the certification body, it was decided that certification should be achieved at the group level (allowed under FSC-STD-20-007, section 3.3.5 for groups of SLIMFs). Group structure was based on the already close collaboration between the group Manager (FLOPEN) and members. FLOPEN inventoried and mapped all members’ properties to gather the baseline data for management planning. Management options were then discussed with and defined by the members, according to their objectives.



One of the programmes set up by FLOPEN combats the dangers of forest fires.

Creating new Systems & Partnerships

Certification pushed FLOPEN into devising new systems and tools that worked for them. This included creating the CERNE database, which enables the scheduling of operational activities, and compiling GPS mapping data. These tools enable articulated silvicultural operations and conservation activities, and allowed the members to share both mechanical & technical resources and, therefore, costs.

Partnerships were also established: SATIVA (SA Woodmark Mediterranean Programme) carried out a participatory pre-assessment during which members learnt to assess and improve their own levels of compliance, and later led a study tour to the UK to visit several already FSC-certified group schemes to discuss organisational models with other group managers; a Portuguese forest company, SILVICAIMA (SA-FM/COC-1512), introduced the Proforest HCVF Toolkit to the group and provided initial training on how this methodology was implemented for their own certification and how it could be adapted to FLOPEN's situation.



A community access High Conservation Value Forest.

Impacts

With respect to markets, FLOPEN is now able to negotiate better prices with the mills for larger volumes of FSC-certified timber and pass this directly to the group members, removing some of the power from the timber traders gained via their closed negotiations with the mills. Forest contractors sell their harvesting & transport services to the FLOPEN group members in open bidding sessions. Contractors have to prove that they are in compliance with legal health & safety requirements in order to qualify to work in FLOPEN's certified forests, and their operational performance is monitored by the group members to ensure that FSC standards are maintained on site.

Lessons Learnt

- > "Thinking and acting as one entity"- it has been proven to, and accepted by, FLOPEN members that there is more profitability, both in sales and in technical ability, by being in the group rather than by acting individually.
- > To promote functionality it is fundamental to design systems and plan activities based on what is appropriate for members of the group - this was achieved through a long process of consultation and capacity building.
- > Regular communication from group members with the Group Manager is essential and should be implemented as best practice. FLOPEN uses a 3-monthly activity report from members as the main tool for conducting monitoring.

The most important lesson learned is to understand how the group members behave socially and then design appropriate systems.

The Future

Some of the remaining challenges for FLOPEN are:

- > Educating group members on how to expand in a sustainably, economically and technically viable way, without affecting production rates or conservation needs.
- > Overcoming the lack of technical input from relevant stakeholders (eg: local NGOs, the state conservation authority etc) regarding HCVs, which has led to developing partnerships with students to help identify potential HCVs, and the properties where they might be found.
- > Developing management prescriptions for the protection and enhancement of identified HCVs using country-specific methodologies developed by the Portuguese National Initiative and the experience of existing FSC certified companies.

Facts & Figures

Certificate details: SA-FM/COC-001764, for group of SLIMFs, issued for eucalyptus & pine round-wood on 19 October 2007
Area: 774 ha
Membership: 44 members each with multiple FMUs ranging from 0.06 - 50 ha; 85% of properties <2 ha & 8% <5 ha
Quantities: Annual Turnover US \$380,000; 50,000 m³

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