



Course: ATFS Eligibility and Standards for Management Plans

ATFS Eligibility and Standards for Management Plans

Course Overview

Potential candidates for certification under ATFS state programs must meet specific eligibility requirements and demonstrate management to the AFF 2015–2020 Standards. In order to demonstrate a commitment to forest health and sustainability, landowners must develop and implement a forest management plan that meets or exceeds the established performance measures.

Course Objectives

After completing this course, you will be able to:

- Verify that landowners meet the eligibility requirements for certification under ATFS state programs.
- Verify that landowners have and are implementing a forest management plan that addresses the requirements outlined in the AFF 2015–2020 Standards for Sustainability.

Lesson 1: Eligibility and Application of the Standards

Lesson Introduction

The 2015–2020 AFF Standards of Sustainability were developed by an independent panel that included academics, environmental non-governmental organizations, forest industry representatives, tree farmers, volunteer inspectors, and other interested groups. Certification to these standards is the fundamental basis of opportunities for Tree Farmers' wood and other services.

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify the minimum and maximum size of individual contiguous parcels that can be enrolled in the program and what types of ownership are allowed.
- List the eligibility requirements for landowners.
- Understand the terminology used in applying the Standards.
- Identify the updates from the Standards you have been applying.

Topic 1A: Eligibility Requirements for Properties

ATFS certifies properties between 10 and 10,000 contiguous acres through the State Tree Farm Program. For certification purposes, the term “contiguous acres” is defined as discrete parcels that share a boundary line or corner point and are held under the same legal ownership name. Roads wider than 84 feet, inclusive of lanes and cleared zones, constitute breaks in forest parcels.



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Landowners may choose to certify only a portion of their entire property holdings, but they may not exempt a portion of a contiguous forest management unit that does not meet the AFF Standards.

Forested acres may include the following features:

- Food plots
- Water resources, including lakes, ponds, and streams
- Non-forested areas, as long as these areas are small enough that they are an integrated part of the forest system

Non-contiguous parcels must be certified individually with a unique Tree Farm number and specific location information. Non-contiguous Tree Farms under the same ownership do not require separate management plans.

Parcels of 10,000 to 20,000 acres may be eligible under an independently managed group (IMG) or third-party certification, but in general, inspectors do not work with the landowners of these properties.

Topic 1B: Eligibility Requirements for Landowners

To be eligible for certification, landowners must fulfill the following requirements:

- Ownership must be privately held or held by a public entity. State-owned lands are not eligible for participation under state Tree Farm programs, and publically traded companies are not eligible for Tree Farm certification.
- Properties must be non-industrial but may be associated with a small local business.
- Landowners must clearly exhibit commitment to sustainable management through their objectives. A management plan that conforms to the requirements of the 2015–2020 AFF Standards is the benchmark.
- Landowners must demonstrate proactive forest management involvement. This can be accomplished by collaborating on the development of the management plan, by periodic monitoring visits to the property, or by hiring a qualified natural resource professional to oversee the management of the property.
- Ownership goals and objectives must reinforce the ATFS mission. Conformance to AFF Standard 1 is sufficient for meeting this requirement.
- Landowners must agree to participate in third-party assessments.
- Landowners engage in active outreach efforts or can contribute to such efforts. There are several ways that forest owners can participate in outreach efforts, including hosting forest-related tours on their property; joining a national, regional, or local forestry or forest-owner association; and supporting forest-related legislation.

Landowner requirements may be delegated to a designated representative to implement the requirements of the program on behalf of the landowner. However, landowners must be engaged in the decision to pursue certification.



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Topic 1C: Terminology

Introduction

To correctly apply the Standards, you must understand the following terminology:

Standard

A Standard is an overarching principle of sustainability. There are eight Standards in the AFF 2015–2020 Standards of Sustainability.

Performance Measure

A performance measure refines the Standard's intent and describes considerations and pathways for conformance.

Indicator

An indicator identifies specific actions or activities that demonstrate conformance.

Performance Measures or Indicators Containing the Word “Shall”

Any performance measures or indicators that contain the word “shall” are core elements that are required for certification by ATFS.

Indicators that Contain the Word “Should”

Any indicator that contains the word “should” is not required but instead is a directive that draws on the personal and professional judgment of landowners and inspectors. These indicators allow for latitude in implementation to the greatest practical extent in a given set of circumstances.

Guidance Information

Guidance information in the Standards helps inspectors and landowners interpret how the Standards are applied in the field.

Topic 1D: Changes to the Standards

In addition, the 2015–2020 Standards include some changes from the previous version of the Standards. These changes include the following:

- The word “must” was replaced with the word “shall,” which is used by the International Standards Organization, or ISO, and other organizations, allowing certified Tree Farmers better recognition and acceptance in global markets.
- Language related to management plans was modified to support utilizing adaptive, innovative approaches to meet landowners' objectives.
- The Standards and Guidance were enhanced to encompass Best Management Practices (BMPs) that relate to air, water, soil, and site quality elements.



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- Language was refined to make clear the obligations for protection of occupied habitats and communities in accordance with federal and state frameworks.
- Standards on forest health that previously focused on integrated pest management (IPM) as an alternative to chemical use now recognize the need to promote a broader understanding of forest health issues by integrating resilience to multiple stressors and disturbances.
- The updates define Forests of Recognized Importance (FORI), formerly known as High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF), and establish a process for identifying them in the context of ATFS certification and provide guidance on how a landowner may contribute to these unique values.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you:

- Identified the minimum and maximum size of individual contiguous parcels that can be enrolled in the program and what types of ownership are allowed.
- Listed the eligibility requirements for landowners.
- Understood the terminology used in applying the Standards.
- Identified the updates from the Standards you have been applying.

Lesson 2: Verify the Completeness of the Management Plan

Lesson Introduction

The core element of participation in ATFS certification is the management plan that the landowner creates and implements to direct forest management activities on the property. The management plan is essential for determining if the landowner is in compliance with ATFS Standards, and it must demonstrate a commitment to forest health and sustainability.

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify the requirements a landowner must fulfill when creating or updating a forest management plan.
- Verify that the landowner's management plan is appropriate for current objectives, based on current knowledge of natural resources and sustainable forest management, and consistent with the size of the forest and the scale and intensity of the activities.
- Verify that a management plan meets stated landowner objectives.
- Learn to identify acceptable methods for keeping the management plan current.



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Topic 2A: Performance Measure 1.1, Commitment to Practicing Sustainable Forestry

AFF Standard 1 states, “Landowner demonstrates commitment to forest health and sustainability by developing a forest management plan and implementing sustainable practices.” The Standard includes Performance Measure 1.1, which states, “Landowner shall have and implement a written forest management plan consistent with the size of the forest and the scale and intensity of the forest activities.”

A management plan may include several documents in a variety of formats and language styles that, when taken together, constitute a single plan. Landowners are encouraged to incorporate language that best represents their objectives, capacity for management, and access to professional support, as well as the conditions on the property, including the size, scale, and intensity of operations. Landowners may use umbrella management plans for the management of multiple parcels and ownerships.

Topic 2B: Indicator 1.1.1, Written Plan

Indicator 1.1.1 supports Performance Measure 1.1 by stating, “Management plan shall be active, adaptive, and embody the landowner’s current objectives, remain appropriate for the land certified, and reflect the current state of knowledge about natural resources and sustainable forest management.”

Essentially, landowners have considerable latitude in developing a plan, but it shall accurately reflect the landowner’s objectives, prescribe planned activities on the property, and shall be updated as necessary to reflect actual management activities.

Additionally, the concept of adaptive management requires that the landowner not be required to follow the plan prescriptions should circumstances on the property, its management, or the objectives change. Changes may include changes in the landowner’s personal circumstances, sale and acquisition of certified property, natural disasters, and pest and disease outbreaks. The plan is expected to avoid management practices that do not support sustainable forest management.

Topic 2C: Indicator 1.1.2, Management Plan Requirements

Introduction

To further identify specific actions that demonstrate conformance with this Standard, Indicator 1.1.2 requires:

- Part 1: “Management plans shall describe current forest conditions, landowner’s objectives, management activities aimed at achieving landowner’s objectives, document a feasible strategy for activity implementation, and include a map accurately depicting significant forest-related resources.”
- Part 2: “The forest management plan shall demonstrate consideration of the following resource elements: forest health, soil, water, wood and fiber production, threatened and endangered species, special sites, invasive species, and forests of recognized importance. Where present and relevant to the property, the plan shall describe management activities related to these resource elements.”



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- Part 3: “Where present, relevant to the property and consistent with landowner’s objectives, the plan preparer should consider, describe, and evaluate the following resource elements: fire, wetlands, desired species, recreation, forest aesthetics, biomass, and carbon.”

Management Plan Requirements, Part 1

Within Part 1 of the management plan requirements indicator, current conditions may be described in general terms. The level of detail when describing current conditions may vary widely based on a number of factors, including access to technical support and the scale and intensity of management. Third-party assessors are encouraged to recognize a range of approaches when examining the descriptions of the current conditions.

Additionally, landowner objectives shall be clear, concise, high-level statements of what the landowner hopes to accomplish through the property management. While the range of language styles and approaches toward describing the objectives may vary widely, the plan shall include strategies for achieving the objectives.

Management Plan Requirements, Part 2

For Part 2, this Indicator requires the landowner to specifically address the requirements in AFF Standards 5 through 7. The plan needs to explicitly mention each of the required topics listed in the Indicator. If the requirement for one of the topics is not applicable to the property, for example, endangered species, the plan shall clearly state that and describe how that determination was made.

Management Plan Requirements, Part 3

While not required by the Indicator, Part 3 states that if the attributes listed in this section of the Indicator are present on the property, the landowner may consider including these elements in the plan with the understanding that there is no required level of detail.

ATFS Inspectors should remember that plans are adaptive and responsive to a variety of factors and are not strict blueprints for landowners’ management activities. When assessing conformance, an Inspector should ask, “Does the failure to perform an activity described in a plan constitute a breach of sustainability for this property?” If the answer is no, then the landowner is still in compliance. If the answer is yes, then the landowner must address the issue.

Topic 2D: Indicator 1.1.3, Monitor a Management Plan

Indicator 1.1.3 reads as follows: “Landowner should monitor for changes that could interfere with the management objectives as stated in management plan. When problems are found, reasonable actions are taken.”



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This Indicator includes the word “should” rather than “shall.” Therefore, landowners are encouraged but not required to monitor for changes that could interfere with their objectives. They are encouraged to keep a written record of observations and to document changing conditions, which could include storm damage or the presence of invasive species, using methods such as handwritten notes, photographs, and online tools, including the AFF’s My Land Plan website.

Landowners are encouraged to update their management plans based on their monitoring activities. A management plan is considered current if it is consistent with the landowner’s objectives, regardless of when it was created.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you:

- Identified the requirements a landowner must fulfill when creating or updating a forest management plan.
- Verified that the landowner’s management plan is appropriate for current objectives and is based on current knowledge of natural resources and sustainable forest management.
- Verified that a management plan meets stated landowner objectives.
- Learned to identify acceptable methods of keeping the management plan current.

Course Summary

In this course, you:

- Verified that landowners meet the eligibility requirements for certification under ATFS state programs.
- Verified that landowners have and are implementing a forest management plan that addresses the requirements outlined in the AFF 2015–2020 Standards for Sustainability.

Assessment

Thank You