

## FSC & OTHER EFFECTIVE AREA-BASED CONSERVATION MEASURES

How FSC Canada is supporting Canada's conservation targets through OECMs

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### BACKGROUND

Canada, along with 195 other countries, has agreed to a set of targets intended to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity. The 23 targets are described in the Global Biodiversity Framework, which was agreed to in 2022 in Montreal. Several of these targets are relevant to sustainable forestry and FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification. Target 3, or 30 x 30, is the commitment to protect 30% of Canada's lands and waters by 2030.

Areas that contribute to 30x30 should be well-connected, ecologically representative, well-managed, and equitably governed. Protection can be in the form of protected areas, like provincial or national parks or ecological land trust properties. There are also other effective area-based conservation measures, or OECMs, that contribute to 30 x 30.

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## FAQS

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### 1. IS OECM A LEGAL DESIGNATION?

- Recognizing and reporting an area as an OECM is a formal acknowledgment of legal, policy, and/or other mechanisms that are used to manage threats and support biodiversity for the long term. It is these rigorous guardrails that make an area more likely to meet the criteria for recognition as an OECM.
- Having an area recognized as an OECM does not confer new status to it but does raise the profile of its value to biodiversity. The work underway to address 30 x 30 can also lead to new OECMs as partners work together to strengthen existing management approaches.
- For example: Ecologically significant areas (special management zones) in Northumberland County Forest have been recognized as OECMs because of the multiple layers of legislation, policy, and intent that dictate their long-term management.

### 2. WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PROTECTED AREA AND AN OECM?

- OECMs are complementary to protected areas and may allow for a wider range of management approaches.
- Protected areas must have a primary objective of conservation, while OECMs may have a different primary management objective, so long as biodiversity conservation is still the outcome (for example, research areas or portions of military bases could qualify as OECMs even though conservation is not the primary purpose of management of that land).

### 3. ARE THERE DIFFERENT RULES FOR OECMS IN DIFFERENT PROVINCES AND COUNTRIES?

- The global definition and criteria for OECM identification is described in guidance available from the [International Union for the Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\)](#). This guidance has been translated into a Canadian context in the [pan-Canadian Decision Support Tool](#).
- Though the pan-Canadian guidelines were intended to facilitate consistency, they may be interpreted differently among provinces and territories, depending on regional policy priorities and approaches. However, the intent is the same everywhere – to recognize effective biodiversity conservation in the long-term.
- [Quebec](#) has developed regionally-specific OECM guidelines based on and consistent with the international and pan-Canadian guidelines, and some provinces may develop their own OECM policies.
- FSC Canada is positioned to support a high and consistent standard of OECM recognition across the country, with several areas of strong alignment between the FSC Standard and OECM guidelines.

#### 4. IS THERE A MINIMUM SIZE FOR OECMS?

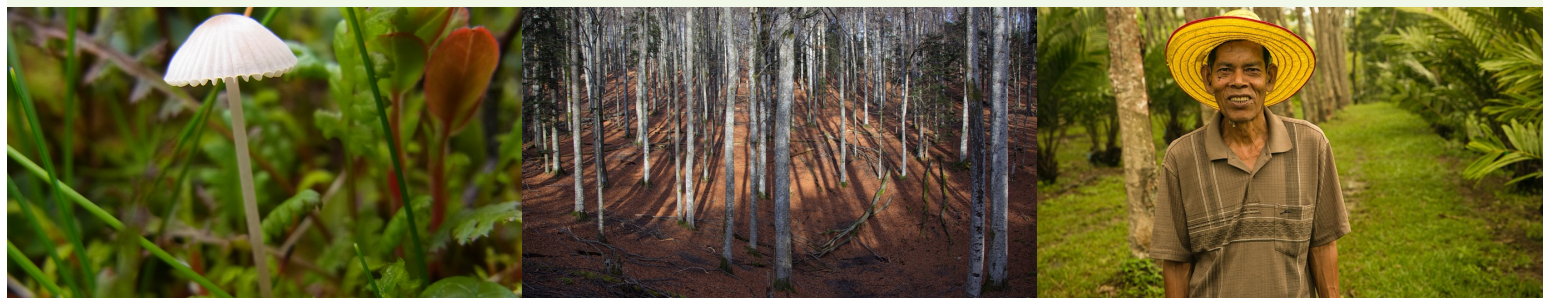
- OECMs need to deliver biodiversity outcomes, so their size should reflect the ecologically-relevant scale of key components of biodiversity and ecological processes. For example, in parts of Canada with wide-ranging keystone species, OECMs should be large or connected enough to provide habitat for those species.
- Some provinces are considering minimum sizes to meet their regional contexts.
- In a large forest management unit context, small, disconnected parcels are less likely to deliver effective biodiversity outcomes than large or well-connected areas.
- For more information refer to the information shared by the [Canadian Pathway group](#).

#### 5. WHAT RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES ARE ALLOWED IN OECMS?

- A variety of activities may be allowed in OECMs, depending on their potential impact to biodiversity. OECM recognition doesn't mean an area is open for access by all. It also doesn't remove existing access by current users.
- It's a common misconception that areas recognized for their conservation value must be closed off to human activity. In fact, hunting, fishing, trapping, and many recreational activities are generally allowed or even welcomed in many OECMs.

#### 6. HOW DO OECMS CONTRIBUTE TO NATURE-BASED CLIMATE SOLUTIONS?

- Areas that may qualify as OECMs, such as peat-based wetlands and intact forests, absorb and store carbon in above-ground biomass and in their soils. In some areas they may also contribute to climate risk reduction like flood abatement or windbreaks.
- They also provide ecosystem services like biodiversity conservation, habitat protection, and sustainable non-industrial resource use.



## OECMS AND FSC-CERTIFIED FORESTS

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### 7. HOW CAN INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND KNOWLEDGE BE RESPECTED AND ACKNOWLEDGED WHEN CONSIDERING OECMS?

- Within FSC certified forests, forest managers are required to engage meaningfully with Indigenous Peoples to identify sites that are of special cultural, ecological, economic, religious, or spiritual significance. Management or protection of these sites needs to be agreed upon.
- Many FSC certificate holders (forest managers) already have strong relationships with Indigenous communities and work with them to select biodiversity set-aside areas on the landscape, which is a good start.

### 8. WHERE HAVE OECMS ALREADY BEEN IDENTIFIED IN FSC-CERTIFIED FORESTS?

- There are currently examples of recognized OECMs within private and community forests in Ontario that are certified under the FSC standard for smallholder and community forests (Northumberland County Forest, Haliburton Forest & Wildlife Reserve Ltd.).
- Other areas of managed forests on public and private land have been recognized as OECMs, particularly in British Columbia and New Brunswick. FSC Canada is learning from previous examples to ensure that future OECMs in FSC certified forests are robust and stand up to scrutiny.

### 9. WHAT IS FSC CANADA DOING ABOUT OECMS?

- FSC Canada has received funding from Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) to examine how the FSC standards align with and support OECM recognition in managed forests across the country. This work includes:
  - Convening conversations with government and industry representatives, ENGOs and Indigenous rights holders.
  - Leveraging influence with industry, partners, and government to identify and propose solutions to barriers to OECM recognition.
  - Determining the best avenues to facilitate OECM recognition, which may include possible future updates to existing FSC tools.
  - Sharing lessons learned across the country.

## 10. WHY SHOULD FOREST MANAGERS GET INVOLVED IN THE 30 X 30 TARGET? WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND COSTS FOR FOREST MANAGERS?

- FSC certified forests are poised to be reputable leaders in OECMs because of FSC’s Indigenous consultation, effectiveness monitoring, and auditing requirements.
- FSC Canada’s work is meant to support certificate holders in getting recognition for the work that they are already doing. Forest managers who are already leading this work across Canada have an opportunity set the course in a practical way.
- FSC Canada is investigating the opportunities for added Ecosystem Services (ES) value for OECMs under FSC’s Verified Impacts procedure.
- There is increasing pressure from government and communities to contribute to meeting these objectives, with opportunity for certificate holders to cement their reputation as industry leaders and guide 30 x 30 on the landscape.
- Many areas that may meet OECM requirements are already set aside from harvest for protection, because of cost or other barriers to harvest, or as a part of FSC’s existing conserved area network requirements. Formalizing long-term conservation has relatively low costs for forest managers.

## 11. HOW PERMANENT ARE OECMS MEANT TO BE?

- Similar to formally protected areas, OECMs should be managed in a way that conserves biodiversity in perpetuity.
- Forestry management rotation areas are not considered eligible to be OECMs under the international and pan-Canadian guidance.
- Ultimately, more land managed for conservation is good. However, not all forms of area-based conservation qualify for 30 x 30 and some forms of management may instead contribute to Target 10, which focuses on the biodiversity benefits of sustainable resource management. Long-term intent and biodiversity outcomes, alongside the other pan-Canadian criteria, are fundamental to the 30 x 30 target.
- For more information refer to the pan-Canadian Pathway initiative.

## 12. WHAT PARTS OF AN FSC-CERTIFIED FOREST MIGHT QUALIFY AS OECMS?

- There are strong possibilities for OECMs to be identified within the designated conservation lands of FSC certified forests, as well as within intact forest landscapes.
- FSC Canada is undertaking work to learn what OECMs possibilities may exist within caribou habitat and within some categories of High Conservation Value areas.

### **13. WHY AREN'T FSC-REQUIRED BIODIVERSITY SET-ASIDES LIKE DESIGNATED CONSERVATION LANDS AND HIGH CONSERVATION VALUE AREAS AUTOMATICALLY COUNTED AS OECMS?**

- Areas must meet several criteria to count as OECMs and must have the consent of the governing authorities. As forest managers, certificate holders make decisions about land use related to forestry operations. The most robust OECM candidates are acknowledged and agreed to by all governing authorities, including Indigenous nations, provincial governments, and other industrial resource licensees.

### **14. IS ANY KIND OF HARVEST OPERATION ALLOWED IN OECMS? WHAT ABOUT LOW IMPACT HARVEST (E.G. SELECTION CUT) OR PRACTICES THAT EMULATE NATURAL DISTURBANCE?**

- International and pan-Canadian guidance is clear that OECMs are areas where industrial resource extraction does not take place.
- Areas of FSC-certified forests that are open for harvest operations are addressed under another of the global and Canadian biodiversity targets, [Target 10](#), which relates to enhanced biodiversity and sustainability in agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, and forestry.

### **15. HOW WILL IDENTIFYING AND REPORTING OECMS AFFECT FOREST OPERATIONS AND MANAGEMENT PLANNING, INCLUDING TIMBER ALLOCATIONS?**

- Recognizing areas as OECMs is an acknowledgement of existing management practices and intents. It's not meant as a new, novel designation that decreases lumber supply. OECM recognition ensures that areas that are meant never to be harvested are recognized as such, and may support forest managers to make Verified Impact claims.
- Many potential OECMs in FSC certified forests are already set aside from harvest for the long-term, such as designated conservation lands identified to meet criterion 6.5 of the standard.
- In order to fully meet the standards for OECMs we anticipate that some policies or partnerships will need to be strengthened.
- FSC Canada is working with provincial governments to raise awareness of the OECM opportunity within FSC-certified forests and to advocate for updating provincial policies to better support the conservation interests of the forestry sector.

### **16. HOW SHOULD FOREST MANAGERS ENGAGE WITH LOCAL RIGHTS-HOLDERS, COMMUNITIES, STAKEHOLDERS, AND GOVERNMENTS ABOUT OECMS?**

- As part of regular engagement approaches as required by the FSC standard.
- In some provinces, FSC certificate holders (forest managers) may be in a position to encourage provincial action on OECMs.

## 17. HOW ARE OECMS RELATED TO OTHER LAND-USE PLANNING PROCESSES AND DESIGNATIONS?

- Ideally, the work to identify OECMs should be integrated with other land-use planning work. The opportunities will differ by province.
- OECMs can be part of other conservation networks, such as corridors.
- Indigenous communities may be interested in leading conservation discussions and identifying Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) or Indigenous Cultural Landscapes as OECMs.

## 18. WHAT KINDS OF BIODIVERSITY SHOULD BE CONSERVED IN AN OECM IN A MANAGED FOREST?

- Biodiversity is the variety of life in an area and the systems and processes that sustain that life. Biodiversity encompasses the diversity within species, between species, and of ecosystems.
- OECMs that count towards the 30 x 30 target should be areas with high biodiversity value. This includes all aspects of biodiversity as a whole: plants, animals, fungi, and micro-organisms.
- For this reason, small areas of concern meant to protect a single ecological feature like a stick nest or a narrow riparian zone may not meet the criteria for an OECM.

## 19. IF PART OF AN OECM BURNS OR IS AFFECTED BY INSECT PESTS WILL A NEW OECM HAVE TO BE IDENTIFIED TO REPLACE IT?

- OECMs are areas where natural processes take place. While the scale, intensity, and frequency of forest fires has increased because of climate change and its related impacts (like changes in insect outbreaks), fire in many forest types is a natural part of the ecological cycle.
- Ecologically appropriate restoration is allowed within OECMs.
- Interventions required for fire or insect management in OECMs is a topic requiring more investigation.

## 20. ARE OECMS MONITORED AND EVALUATED OVER TIME? HOW?

- The international guidelines for OECMs recommend that OECMs be monitored over time to ensure they are having positive biodiversity outcomes.
- The FSC principles and indicators associated with designated conservation lands, IFLs, caribou habitat, and high conservation value areas, which may align with OECM criteria, are monitored for conformance by third-party auditors on a regular 5-year schedule.

### For further information, please contact:

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