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In 2022, Canada, along with 195 other countries, agreed to a set of targets intended to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity globally. The best known of these may be Target 3, more commonly referred to as 30x30: a commitment to permanently protect 30% of lands and waters by 2030.

This commitment was widely celebrated as a way to conserve Canada's rich natural heritage and diverse landscapes, from boreal forest to wetlands and prairies. But of course, big commitments often face big challenges when it comes to implementation, and 30x30 is no exception.

Many complex questions began to emerge. How should we identify which lands have sufficiently strong conservation values? The federal government, provinces, municipalities, Indigenous Peoples and private landowners and companies all have a stake in land management - who gets to decide what gets conserved and how? What happens if the land changes - for example as a result of wildfire?

This is where FSC Canada comes in. With clear conservation standards and a deep history of working alongside Indigenous communities, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC, the federal department charged with implementing 30x30) recognized the potential for a valuable partnership. In particular, they were interested in exploring how a promising conservation solution, OECMS, could allow FSC-certified managed forests to help meet the 30x30 target.

What are OECMs?

OECM stands for 'Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures'. OECMs are unique in conservation because they don't require the land to be managed specifically for conservation, as long as conservation is the outcome. So, for example, parts of military bases or research areas could qualify as OECMs, even though the primary management purpose of that land isn't conservation.

The OECM label is a recognition or acknowledgment of legal, policy, and other mechanisms that define the way an area is managed for the long term. With existing conservation requirements built into the FSC standard, FSC-certified forests that are already setting aside areas with rich biodiversity value are often well on the way towards meeting the requirements of an OECM.

To learn more about OECMs, find additional information and FAQs on our project page.

FSC's Role

As the globally-recognised leader in sustainable forestry standards, FSC has a deep understanding of what conservation in managed forest landscapes looks like, the challenges that can arise, and the broad networks to bring together the expertise and influence needed to make an impact.

FSC also has an interest in strengthening sustainable forestry practices in Canada, continually improving our standards and guidance, and supporting forest managers to be rewarded for their conservation efforts.

With these objectives in mind, FSC has brought together forest managers, academics, conservation experts and Indigenous leaders to help develop a clearer picture of the role OECMs can play in both helping Canada achieve its conservation targets and in supporting sustainable forestry and its certificate holders.

Complexities and Considerations

A shrinking window to scale conservation
Currently, less than 14% of land in Canada is formally protected in parks and other protected areas or recognized as OECMs, meaning protections need to more than double in the next four years in order for Canada to achieve its 30x30 target.

Distributed land management, varying controls
94% of Canada's forests are on public land, with just 6% in private ownership. Responsibility for public lands is typically held by provincial governments, along with Indigenous rights holders who have a constitutionally protected stake in decision-making.
Certificate holders on public forests do not have authority over non-forestry related industrial activities or infrastructure development (e.g. oil and gas, mining) and can't, alone, secure areas from these potential threats.

Future-proofing
OECM criteria require that the area is permanently protected or conserved, and mechanisms are not easily reversed. This is currently challenging as forest-management agreements on public lands are time-limited, while private lands can change ownership or FSC certification can lapse and conservation priorities change.

The Opportunities Ahead: FSC's recommendations

While the complexities are significant, there remains real opportunity to progress conservation through Canadian managed forests and the FSC sphere of influence. Just a few recommendations from our comprehensive report:

OECMs and protected areas should be considered together
OECMs are just one means of securing conservation goals. Protected areas are typically governed by a single statute and can be less complicated to implement and steward: leaving both options open can help to accelerate progress towards the 30x30 target.

Align FSC's conservation activities with the most appropriate target

While Target 3 (30x30) has received substantial attention, the Global Biodiversity Framework and Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy have a total of 23 targets, designed to work together to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. Relevantly, Target 10 addresses sustainable forestry practices, and Target 4 addresses threatened species, both of which FSC's standard directly speaks to.

FSC has a significant opportunity to use its influence and convening power to support the advancement of these targets in addition to 30x30.

Verified Impact is a powerful solution

FSC's Verified Impact solution is a unique conservation finance tool which connects forest managers with potential new revenue streams for protecting a forest's ecosystem services. Ecosystem services claims may be able to attract additional value for certificate holders who successfully achieve the recognition of high-quality protected areas or OECMs by demonstrating with more certainty the conservation outcomes achieved.

Indigenous rights are foundational

Underpinning each of these recommendations is the recognition that Indigenous rights and the application of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) is foundational to conservation decision-making. The FSC standard and associated guidance lays out approaches to culturally appropriate engagement and shared decision making with Indigenous Peoples in FSC certified forests, including an FPIC process that aims to achieve binding agreements with Indigenous rights holders and impacted peoples. Indigenous rights holders should be at the table in all conservation discussions.

Next Steps

FSC Canada will continue to use our convening power to facilitate discussions with federal and provincial governments, Indigenous rights holders and forestry experts to advance progress towards the 30x30 goal in Canada.
Additionally, FSC Canada can draw on learnings from this project and its position within FSC International to facilitate wider discussions about OECMs and the role managed forests can play in halting and reversing biodiversity loss globally.
We look forward to growing our reputation as a credible, leading voice in sustainability and contributing to healthier, more resilient forests in Canada and beyond.

Environment and Climate Change Canada
Environnement et Changement climatique Canada