Opportunities for Advancing Canada's Conservation Network Through FSC Certification

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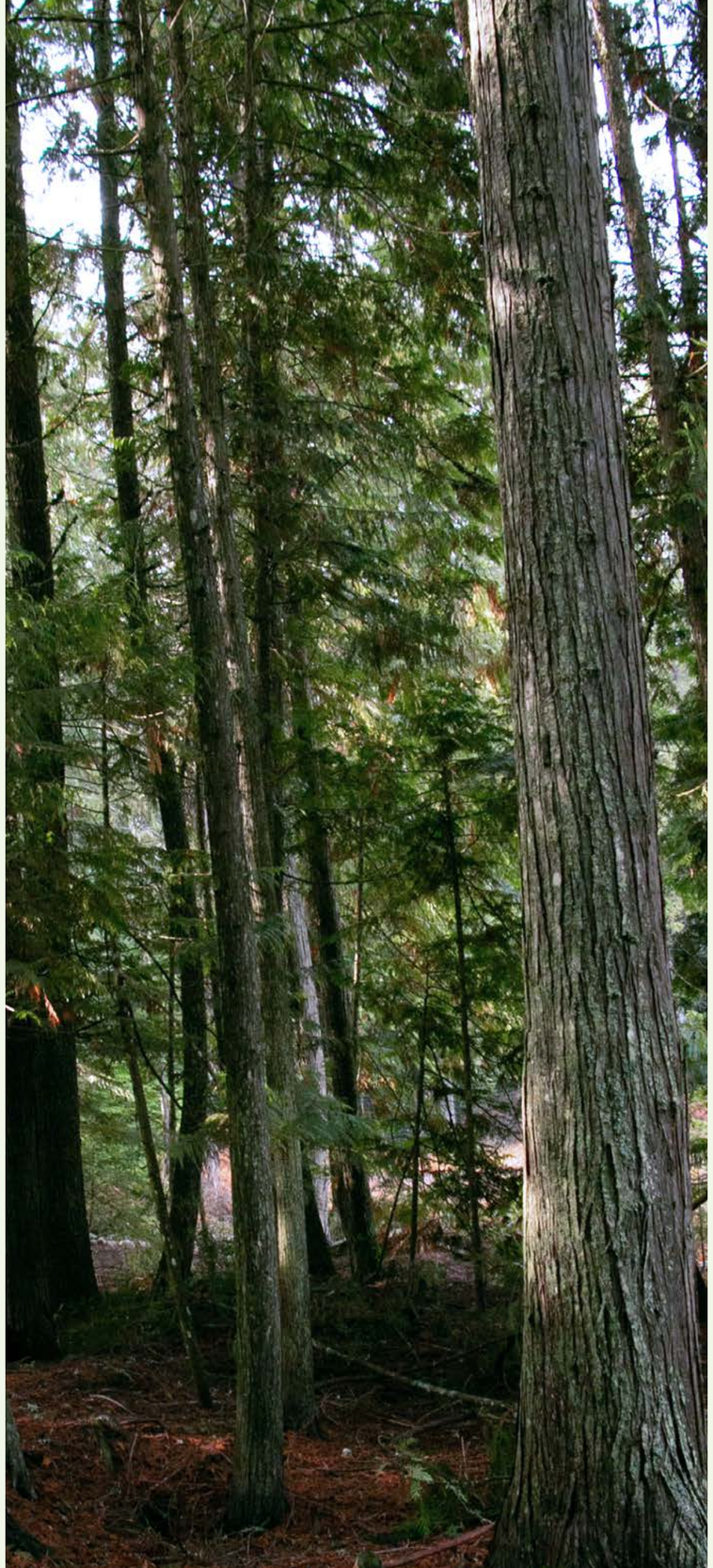
FSC Canada acknowledges the traditional territories of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, whose stewardship has sustained these forests since time immemorial. We recognize the homelands of more than 600 Indigenous communities and the essential role of Indigenous leadership in responding to climate change and strengthening forest resilience. Our work is grounded in respect for Indigenous rights and jurisdiction, including Free, Prior and Informed Consent, and in supporting opportunities for Indigenous participation and self determination within forest certification. We commit to ongoing learning, transparent dialogue, and partnerships that uphold ecological integrity and honour Indigenous governance systems across Canada.



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Abbreviations

CAN	Conservation Areas Network
CPCAD	Canadian Protected and Conserved Area Database
COP	Convention on Biological Diversity
DCLs	Designated Conservation Lands
DST	Decision Support Tool
ECCC	Environment and Climate Change Canada
FPIC	Free, Prior and Informed Consent
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
GBF	Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
HCVA	High Conservation Value Areas
ICL	Indigenous Cultural Lands
IPCAs	Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OECMs	Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures
PAs	Protected Areas
UN CBD	United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity
VI-ES	Verified Impact – Ecosystem Service

Introduction

This paper summarizes key findings of a two-year project exploring the relationship between FSC standards and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) and how FSC Canada and its certificate holders can contribute to Canada's commitment to protect and conserve at least 30% of land and freshwater by 2030. Global and national conservation targets specify that both protected areas and OECMs can be recognized and reported towards this 30 by 30 goal. While protected areas are a long-standing, proven area-based conservation measure and are integrated into FSC Forest Stewardship Standards, OECMs have emerged more recently as a potential complementary conservation tool and are not, at this point, part of the FSC standard or practice.

As of the end of 2025, 13.8% of the terrestrial and inland waters in Canada are recognized and reported as protected areas and OECMs. Achieving the 30% target will require more than doubling the current area under permanent protection in just a few years.

The goal of this project was to determine whether and how FSC Canada and certificate holders could contribute to recognizing OECMs within their tenure areas and to recommend future actions to leverage this potential opportunity to conserve forest ecosystems through FSC standards and certification.

FSC Canada recognizes and supports the international and pan-Canadian standards and guidance for OECMs. For Canada to be a global leader in conserving nature, all partners need to be rigorous in the application of these standards.

With 94% of Canada's forests on public land and only six percent in private ownership, provincial governments have a particularly key role to play in recognizing and managing forest OECMs given their responsibility for land and resource management. Whether FSC certificate holders are operating on public land or private land can have a big impact on the contributions that companies are able to make towards recognizing OECMs.

Through this project FSC-Canada and certificate holders have determined that they can make valuable and significant contributions towards recognizing high-quality OECMs in the managed forest through implementation of FSC Canada's National Forest Stewardship Standard. These contributions can include convening interested rightsholders and stakeholders to help build consensus on land use decisions, engaging with Indigenous nations and ensuring their free, prior and informed consent, and identifying ecologically significant potential OECMs through rigorous and inclusive conservation planning processes.

However, the project also found that FSC and certificate holders alone will not generally be able to meet all necessary OECM criteria, particularly on public forests. Support and complementary actions by provincial governments and other parties will be needed to ensure that OECMs fully meet international and Canadian OECM standards and thus deliver effective and equitable conservation outcomes.

The Global Biodiversity Framework and OECMs

With biodiversity loss and climate change threatening the future well-being of the planet, effective and equitable solutions to reverse the decline of nature are urgently needed. In December 2022, a new Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) was adopted by 196 countries under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at COP 15 in Montreal. The new GBF includes 4 goals and 23 targets that, working together, aim to halt and reverse the decline of biodiversity by 2030. The Government of Canada included all 23 targets in its 2030 Nature Strategy (2024), and in its 2026 "A Force of Nature: Canada's Strategy to Protect Nature".[1]

FSC Canada is committed to helping implement the GBF in Canada. Many elements of FSC standards intersect with GBF goals and targets, for example those relating to area-based conservation, species at risk, ecosystem restoration, spatial planning, sustainable forest management practices, respecting Indigenous rights and territories and more.

Target 3 sets a goal of effectively and equitably conserving at least 30% of land, freshwater and ocean by 2030 in protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs).[2] Often referred to as the 30x30 target, Target 3 is grounded in the evidence that, at a minimum, 30% of land and freshwater needs to be protected, and nested within a sustainably managed landscape to halt and reverse biodiversity loss, address climate change, and ensure a healthy planet for the future.

Target 3 also recognizes the urgent need to greatly improve the equity and quality of design, governance and management of these areas so they sustain healthy ecosystems in the long term. These important quality elements include focusing on conserving areas important for biodiversity, the need for ecological connectivity, and the importance of recognizing and respecting Indigenous rights and traditional territories.

The concept of OECMs first emerged during the 2010 negotiation of the previous decadal strategic plan under the CBD. In subsequent years work at the international level (through IUCN and the CBD) focused on defining OECMs and developing guidance on how to apply this new conservation tool. At the national level, pan-Canadian guidelines and a Decision Support Tool (DST) were developed, consistent with international guidance, and more recently Quebec published its own provincial guidance (see text box below for details on international, national and provincial standards).

OECMs are supposed to deliver comparable outcomes for biodiversity as protected areas and be complementary to protected areas.[3] The main difference is that while protected areas need to have a primary and overriding objective of conserving biodiversity, OECMs can have objectives other than the conservation of biodiversity while still delivering equivalently effective and equitable conservation outcomes. The pan-Canadian DST outlines a suite of criteria that need to be met for areas to be recognized as protected areas or OECMs and reported to Canada's protected and conserved area database.[4]

[1] Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy: Halting and Reversing Biodiversity Loss in Canada; A Force of Nature: Canada's Strategy to Protect Nature - Canada.ca

[2] Protected areas and OECMs are often (including in Canada) referred to collectively as protected and conserved areas.

[3] Convention on Biological Diversity Decision 14/8

[4] Canadian Protected and Conserved Area Database (CPCAD)

GBF Target 3:

Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognizing indigenous and traditional territories where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories.

Definitions and guidance for protected areas and OECMs:

Federal, provincial and territorial governments in Canada have endorsed the definitions of protected areas and OECMs adopted internationally through the IUCN and UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

A Protected Area is:

A clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.

An OECM is:

A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values.

More detailed guidance on protected areas and OECMs has been developed internationally by IUCN and adopted by Parties to the CBD as Decision 14/8. In Canada, pan-Canadian standards for terrestrial protected areas and OECMs have been developed, consistent with international guidance, and endorsed by federal, provincial and territorial governments. Quebec has developed its own OECM guidance.

- **IUCN Guidance on other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs)**
- **IUCN Guidelines for applying protected area management categories**
- **CBD Decision 14/8: Protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures**
- **Pan Canadian Decision Support Tool**
- **Recognizing Other Effective Conservation Measures within Continental Quebec**

The FSC Canada OECM Project

Since 2018, governments, Indigenous groups, environmental non-government organizations, and forest industry players in Canada have engaged in preliminary discussions about potential opportunities to recognize OECMs within Canada's managed forests. Building on these early discussions, in 2024, with funding from Environment and Climate Change Canada and partnering with Ontario Nature, FSC Canada undertook a two-year, multi-faceted project to further explore the potential for FSC Canada and certificate holders to contribute to the 30% conservation target, focused particularly on areas set aside from harvest under FSC Canada certification. As a global organization, FSC International has developed a Climate and Biodiversity Strategy (2026) that includes recognition of the GBF and Target 3.

Through a series of workshops across Canada with practitioners and experts in FSC standards and OECM recognition, including Indigenous partners, NGOs, certificate holders and independent experts, as well as through commissioned policy briefs, FSC Canada has clarified where opportunities exist to advance OECMs within the scope of FSC certification, and what lies beyond the control of FSC and certificate holders, requiring the engagement and action of other governing authorities. This report summarizes the findings of this work and provides recommendations for next steps.

While substantive guidance and decision aids now exist to support the recognition of OECMs (see text box above), there remains a high level of confusion and misunderstanding about what these are, and how to determine whether an area meets the necessary criteria to be reported.5 Our hope is that this FSC project will help clarify the relationship between OECMs and FSC standards, and the scope of FSC's opportunity to contribute to nationwide efforts to deliver on Target 3 in Canada.

Analysis and discussions with experts found that the most opportunity to contribute to OECMs was likely through Designated Conservation Lands (DCLs) identified through rigorous and inclusive conservation planning processes under Criterion 6.5. Some High Conservation Value areas identified under Principle 9, including areas set aside for boreal caribou and other species at risk, for their cultural values, or for their critical ecosystem services were also identified as having potential to contribute if they were set aside from forest management activities in the long-term. More information on DCLs and HCV areas, including definitions and guidance, is available in the FSC National Forest Stewardship Standard.

[5] Fitzsimons et al (2025). Common misconceptions of 'other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) and implications for global conservation targets. NPJ Biodiversity.

Foundational Principles

FSC Canada recognizes the severe impacts facing forests and forest-dependent communities from the interconnected climate change and biodiversity loss crises and is committed to ensuring its work related to OECMs and the broader GBF contributes in a meaningful way towards addressing these crises. FSC is also committed to upholding the integrity of the FSC certification system. As such, through our first year's work we identified key principles to guide FSC work related to OECMs, Target 3, and the broader GBF:

1. Respect for Indigenous rights and jurisdiction, including free, prior and informed consent, is a fundamental requirement of all work related to the GBF, including OECMs.
2. In considering OECMs, the robust requirements of the FSC standards and FSC's integrity must be upheld as the priority.
3. FSC Canada recognizes the criteria and guidance in the international standards and pan-Canadian Decision Support Tool (DST) and uses the DST as the benchmark for this report.
4. Holistic and landscape level conservation planning approaches are needed that recognize and respect Indigenous rights, and incorporate conservation area networks, caribou, other species at risk, and climate change considerations into their analyses.

The below schematic describes the alignment of FSC certification as it relates to OECMs.

FSC Certification offers part of the solution

The Foundation

Legislation, policies, and Indigenous leadership provide the baseline for protection and conservation (including OECMs).

Provincial and Indigenous governance

The Framework

Through FSC voluntary certification high quality areas important for biodiversity are identified in collaboration with Indigenous communities and stakeholders.

FSC Certification

The Outcome

Leveraging the tools of FSC certification supports the identification of OECMs, effective means for their management and building of agreement.

OECM Recognition

Areas of alignment and value

- **Convene partners**, including Indigenous nations, governing authorities, stakeholders to help build consensus.
- Recognize and uphold **Indigenous Peoples' rights** including **free, prior and informed consent** (Principle 3).
- Identify potential OECMs through rigorous FSC conservation planning requirements.
- **Monitor, report and independent audit** requirements offer high level of accountability for conservation outcomes.
- With partners, **encourage provincial governments** and other governing authorities within "sphere of influence" to apply their tools to ensure OECM criteria are fully met.

Relationship Between OECM Criteria and FSC-Canada National Standard

(Conservation Area Networks and High Conservation Value areas)

The strongest alignment between the FSC national standard and OECMs is through Criterion 6.5, which requires certificate holders to identify and protect a Conservation Areas Network comprising a minimum of 10% of the area of the Management Unit, through a rigorous conservation planning approach. This requirement is a key feature of the Standard that sets it apart from other certification systems. Designated Conservation Lands (DCLs) are "expected to be permanently protected"[6], with the certificate holder required to exclude industrial forestry activities in these areas.

There also may be areas that could contribute to OECMs within High Conservation Value areas (Principle 9) that have been set aside from industrial forest management activities for the long-term, or in areas similarly conserved for caribou or other species at risk (Criterion 6.4). The FSC standard notes that some HCVs that are fully protected can also be considered DCLs (or secondary conservation lands on private forests).[7] In this report we consider HCV areas that are off-limits to forest management activities in the long-term as DCLs. Whether the management regime for HCVs is consistent with DCL requirements needs to be assessed and confirmed on a case-by-case basis.

Measures certificate holders are required to take to meet these elements of the FSC standard, particularly on public forests, would likely meet many OECM criteria but not all. We identified two major gaps.

1. **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.**

2. **Certificate holders do not have the authority to ensure these areas remain protected in the long term, beyond the time frame of their tenure, or in situations where FSC certification may be lost or relinquished.**

To address these and other potential gaps, provincial government support to put in place additional protective measures is generally needed to ensure that incompatible activities do not occur and that areas are conserved in the long-term. In most cases, the effective and durable way to fill these gaps would be for provinces to apply their legal and/or policy tools. Other mechanisms may contribute to filling the gaps (for example enforceable agreements of other partners or sectors) but more work to explore other options is needed. On public forests, where provincial governments have authority over land and resources, provincial mechanisms will likely be needed to ensure that areas are conserved in the long-term, beyond the timeframes of tenure agreements.

Indigenous laws and stewardship practices can also play an important role in creating and managing OECMs within FSC-certified tenures, where Indigenous rightsholders are interested in pursuing this approach. For example, Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) that have been declared by rightsholders may meet the criteria of an OECM. However, to be implemented on public forests, provincial governments and other partners need to recognize and respect these Indigenous-led conservation initiatives. More work is needed to determine what supportive provincial mechanisms are needed to support Indigenous-led conservation initiatives over the long-term.

On private land, in some but not all regions of Canada landowners have the legal authority to prevent mining and other harmful activities. Where this is the case, it may be possible for certificate holders to recognize and report high-quality OECMs that have been identified collaboratively with Indigenous rightsholders and stakeholders and that meet all OECM criteria. However, legal and governance frameworks vary across the country and need to be assessed case-by-case.

A long-term objective under the FSC Canada national standard is for DCLs to transition to legal protected area status, with certificate holders required to work within their sphere of influence towards this objective, once there is free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples (6.5.11). However, this has not generally happened, and more work is needed to understand why. The results of this exploration could inform efforts to encourage provincial governments to support and actively partner to create and recognize high-quality OECMs as well.

In the table below, each OECM criterion is compared with relevant requirements under Criterion 6.5 and Principle 9 of the FSC National Standard to assess the degree of overlap that exists and identify any gaps.

[6]See Intent Box on page 62 of the FSC National Forest Stewardship Standard of Canada (V 1.0).

[7]See pages 62-63 of the FSC National Forest Stewardship Standard of Canada (V 1-0)

Table 1.

Comparison of OECM Criteria with elements of the FSC-Canada National Standard

OECM Criteria (DST)	FSC Canada National Standard	Does FSC standard meet OECM criterion?
Geographical Space The area should be clearly demarcated	**Criterion 6.5:** While Conservation Areas Network gap analysis results are required to be mapped (6.5.2) and, for public land, made publicly available (6.5.4), this would likely occur before DCLs are identified (6.5.5). There is currently no requirement for publicly available maps of DCLs. Further clarification of the Standard is likely needed to ensure the geographical space criterion is met. **Principle 9:** High conservation value areas (HCVs) must be delineated on maps (unless ecologically or culturally sensitive information). HCV assessment reports and reviews must be made publicly available. *NOTE: these maps proved difficult to access during this project*	Potentially *Note: Maps of DCLs and HCV areas would need to be more consistently made publicly available*

OECM Criteria (DST)	FSC Canada National Standard	Does FSC standard meet OECM criterion?
Effective Means 1 Governing authorities must have the ability to prevent incompatible activities and effectively manage all other activities in the area to ensure *in-situ*[8] conser-vation of biodiversity can be achieved.	WFSC certificate holders have the authority to control forest management activities on their tenure for the duration of their forest management agreement but, on public land, do not have control over other incompatible activities such as mineral exploration and development, oil and gas exploration and development, or major infrastructure projects. While certificate holders may have some influence over decisions, these activities are controlled by provincial governments and potentially by other private sector entities where there are overlapping tenures. Indigenous rightsholders within tenures may also be governing authorities in these areas. Their free, prior and informed consent is required where rights are affected by forest management activities (Principle 3). These rightsholders may play an important role in determining what activities can take place and how areas are managed. On private land, certificate holders may be able to prevent non-forestry incompatible activities, depending on provincial rules, which vary across Canada. A case-by-case assessment will be required.	Not on public forests Possible on private forests depending on jurisdiction
Effective Means 2 Mechanisms compel governing authorities to prohibit activities incompatible with in-situ conservation of biodiversity.	FSC certification compels certificate holders to adhere to the requirements of FSC standards to maintain their certification. This is reinforced by mandatory monitoring and auditing processes to ensure compliance. These requirements include not undertaking harvesting, silviculture, and road building within DCLs, unless they are to achieve restoration or maintenance of the natural conditions of the area. However, FSC certification cannot compel provincial governments or other tenure holders to prohibit mineral exploration and development, oil and gas exploration and development, or other activities incompatible with the in-situ conservation of biodiversity.	Partially on public forests (gaps remain) Possibly on private forests (case by case assessment necessary)

[8] The term "in situ" conservation is frequently used in the UN CBD and in guidance related to protected areas and OECMs. According to the CBD, "in situ conservation means the conservation of ecosystems and natural habitats and the maintenance and recovery of viable populations of species in their natural surroundings and, in the case of domesticated or cultivated species, in the surroundings where they have developed their distinctive properties."

OECM Criteria (DST)	FSC Canada National Standard	Does FSC standard meet OECM criterion?
Long term The area is permanently protected or conserved, and mechanisms are not easily reversed.	DCLs are "expected to be permanently protected", however if certificate holders lose or relinquish their certification for any reason, DCLs could lose their protection. Also, forest management agreements are time-limited and certificate holders' authority over forest management activities is not assured beyond the timeframe of these agreements. On public forests, additional provincial government mechanisms are needed to ensure areas' long-term protection. FSC requires certificate holders to develop efficient mechanisms to engage and build support and consensus with Indigenous rightsholders and to obtain their free, prior and informed consent. Certificate holders also are required to engage and work towards consensus with interested and affected stakeholders. FPIC and consensus developed through these processes can be valuable precursors to agreements for lasting protection. On private land, certificate holders could put in place mechanisms to ensure permanence (e.g. conservation easements in collaboration with land trusts). Without these long-term mechanisms DCLs are vulnerable if certification is lost or relinquished, or property sold.	No on public forests Possibly on private forests if long-term mechanisms applied (case by case assessment necessary)
Timing (year-round) Biodiversity is protected or conserved year-round	Conservation Areas Networks (CANs), including DCLs are in effect year-round. The management strategies for maintaining and enhancing an HCV may or may not include conservation and may or may not have conservation mechanisms in place year-round – a case-by-case assessment is required.	Yes for CANs Possibly for HCVs

OECM Criteria (DST)	FSC Canada National Standard	Does FSC standard meet OECM criterion?
Scope and primacy of objectives Objectives have sufficient scope to result in the in-situ conservation of biodiversity If conservation objectives are stated as primary and overriding of other objectives, it meets standard for protected area. If conservation objectives are not primary and overriding but are consistent with the in-situ conservation of biodiversity, meets standard for OECM.	DCLs have primary and overriding conservation objectives that reflect broad ecological values. HCVs have primary and overriding conservation objectives. Some HCVs focused on a single species may have sufficient scope to result in in-situ conservation of biodiversity, while others may not. A case-by-case assessment is required.	Yes, for DCLs Possibly for HCVs *Note: given DCLs and HCVs have overriding conservation objectives, they may align better with protected areas than OECMs for this criterion.*
Governing Authorities The in-situ conservation of biodiversity is not jeopardized by relevant governing authorities. All governing authorities acknowledge and abide by the conservation objectives (for PAs) or a management regime that delivers in-situ conservation of biodiversity (for OECMs)	On public forests, certificate holders are not the only governing authorities responsible for the forest management unit. Provincial governments have significant authorities, Indigenous nations have rights and interests, and other private sector entities may have overlapping non-forestry licenses or tenures. While certificate holders are required under the Standard to work "within their sphere of influence" to encourage governments to respect and support FSC conservation areas, FSC and certificate holders cannot, on their own, ensure that all governing authorities acknowledge and abide by protected area or OECM management regimes in the long-term. Additional agreements and/or protective mechanisms will be necessary, along with the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous organizations as required by FSC Principle 3 and 6.5.11. On private land, certificate holders may need to secure the agreement and support of provincial governments, depending on the jurisdiction. A case-by-case assessment is required.	To some extent, on public land. On private land, maybe.

OECM Criteria (DST)	FSC Canada National Standard	Does FSC standard meet OECM criterion?
Biodiversity conservation outcomes PAs and OECMs should have high biodiversity value Biodiversity is effectively conserved in-situ	FSC standard requires the identification of biodiversity values and rigorous conservation planning to inform the selection of DCLs and High Conservation Value areas. The standard requires on-going monitoring and public reporting of summaries of monitoring results, including conservation outcomes. Annual audits against the standard are also required to track compliance.	Yes

Key Findings

During this two-year project, we consistently heard from participants and confirmed through our policy analysis that FSC Canada and certificate holders can make a valuable contribution towards recognizing high-quality OECMs in the managed forest, but that they don't have the necessary authority to meet all the DST criteria. Significant gaps are described in the table above.

This section presents key findings from the project, including considerations for how OECMs fit within FSC certification requirements, and how FSC certification can contribute to recognizing high-quality OECMs. It also highlights some considerations for the additional support needed to fill gaps.

A. Recognition of Indigenous rights and application of free, prior, and informed consent is foundational

Both FSC and the GBF have a strong focus on recognizing and upholding Indigenous Peoples' legal and customary rights, knowledge and traditional territories, including through free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). FSC is the only forest certification system in Canada with FPIC requirements.

Through the principles and criteria in the National Standard (particularly Principle 3) and its FPIC guidance, FSC-Canada has laid solid groundwork for culturally appropriate engagement with Indigenous Peoples in FSC certified forests, including an FPIC process that aims to achieve binding agreements with affected Indigenous Peoples.[9]

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) also makes clear that in implementing Target 3 (as well as other targets), Indigenous rights, including over their traditional territories, and Indigenous knowledge must be recognized and respected, and Indigenous Peoples must be effectively engaged in decision-making, including through their free, prior and informed consent.[10]

FSC recognizes that Indigenous communities may or may not be interested in applying the OECM concept to their lands. In some cases, Indigenous-

[9] See FSC Canada's website for more information on Indigenous Rights , including Free, Prior and Informed Consent Guidance

[10] See CBD Guidance on implementing Target 3

led conservation initiatives, such as Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) declared by Nations[11] and Indigenous Cultural Landscapes (ICLs)[12] may meet, or partially meet, the criteria for OECMs. Discussions about potential OECMs in FSC certified areas, including the possibility of reporting them to CPCAD or pursuing Verified Impacts of conservation finance mechanisms, should include meaningful engagement of affected Indigenous Peoples from the beginning to the end of the process, and only proceed with their free, prior and informed consent.

B. FSC and certificate holders can contribute but generally cannot, on their own, meet all OECM criteria

FSC and certificate holders can play an important role in identifying potential OECMs through rigorous and inclusive conservation planning processes and applying FPIC. However, in most cases they cannot, on their own, meet all the criteria for OECMs because of their limited authority over non-forestry activities and their time-limited tenure. Provincial government support is generally needed to fill gaps, including their agreement to add legal or policy tools to ensure areas meet all DST criteria prior to their recognition and reporting as OECMs. A case-by-case examination of potential OECMs against the pan-Canadian DST will be necessary to the identify gaps that need to be filled.

More work is needed to document the full range of legal or policy mechanisms that provincial governments and/or other governing authorities could apply alone or in combination to help fill gaps in the long-term. For example, provincial governments generally have regulatory mechanisms available to prevent the disposition of lands for mineral exploration or development. Parties could also explore enforceable long-term agreements that could be combined with FSC certification to fully meet the DST criteria.

C. OECMs and protected areas should be considered together

OECMs should not be considered alone, rather they should be considered alongside protected areas as options for the long-term conservation of DCLs.

OECMs are sometimes misconceived as being "quicker or easier to implement or recognize than protected areas"[13]. However, they can be more complex to implement and steward than protected areas because they often have multiple governing authorities and multiple mechanisms required to achieve conservation outcomes. In contrast, protected areas generally are established under a single statute and have one or two (if they are co-managed or governed) primary governing authorities. The relative complexities of OECMs versus protected areas should be considered when deciding which to pursue to achieve the long-term conservation of DCLs.

DCLs have a primary conservation objective and align well with the definition of a protected area. However, in cases on public forests where certificate holders cannot secure provincial government support to establish legal protected areas, OECMs may offer an alternative pathway that enables provincial governments to layer together other protective legal and policy mechanisms that collectively achieve the OECM criteria and then report these areas towards Target 3.

While legal protected areas would be preferable as a pathway to permanently protect DCLs, as they are proven tools that are already part of the FSC Standard, OECMs could also be considered on a voluntary basis, with the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples, and assuming the necessary mechanisms are in place to meet all OECM criteria. OECMs could also be considered to conserve areas beyond the minimum 10% required in the FSC Standard, for example where more areas need protection to achieve conservation goals, and/or there are opportunities to secure conservation finance through a Verified Impact claim.

[11] IPCA - Canada Conservation; IPCA Knowledge Basket; Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas – Indigenous Leadership Initiative

[12] IndigenousCulturalLandscape_report_2021.pdf

[13] Fitzsimmons et al. Common misconceptions of 'other effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs) and implications for global conservation targets. *npj biodivers* 4, 8 (2025) https://doi.org/10.1038/s44185-025-00079-5

D. Need to align FSC's conservation activities with the most appropriate target

The GBF and Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy have 23 targets which are meant to work together to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. Determining which targets align best with which conservation-focused activities is an important first step. Not all area-based conservation activities or measures should be reported as contributing to Target 3. For example, ecological restoration work outside DCLs would align best with Target 2 – the restoration target. Some measures to protect species at risk would align best with Target 4 – the threatened species target. Biodiversity-friendly silvicultural practices conducted according to FSC standards may align with Target 10 – which addresses sustainable forest management practices. Canada will need to report on progress towards all these GBF targets, and FSC certificate holders have an opportunity to contribute to this broader effort as well as to Target 3.

At the national and global level, FSC could play a leadership role in developing guidance for implementing and reporting on Target 10. While detailed guidance and criteria have been developed for Target 3, similar important work has not been done for Target 10.

E. FSC's convening power can help build consensus

FSC Canada has been leveraging its country-wide relationships to better understand the opportunities for OECMs in FSC certified forests and identify potential pathways to overcome barriers to their recognition. At the regional/local level, certificate holders can contribute through FSC-required planning and management processes which include on-going convening of Indigenous rightsholders, other governing authorities, and stakeholders. Through these processes, certificate holders can work to build consensus on where and how protected areas and/or OECMs could appropriately be included in conservation area networks, on applying FPIC, and on what is required to meet all the criteria outlined in the pan-Canadian Decision Support Tool. Support for pilots involving certificate holders, Indigenous rights holders, government representatives and other rights holders (mining and gas), could explore solutions to barriers identified.

F. Readily available maps of DCLs and HCV areas would help support consistent land use decisions by different sectors and governing authorities

Currently, under the FSC Canada standards, there is no requirement that DCLs be identified on publicly available maps. Requiring this information to be mapped and readily available would help communicate to other sectors what areas are off-limits to forest management activities.

All HCV areas are supposed to be delineated on maps (unless they are sensitive for ecological or cultural reasons), however, during this project we found these maps to be inconsistently available. Ensuring DCLs and HCV areas are delineated on publicly available maps, including specifying which areas are permanently set

aside from forest management activities, would help ensure the management objectives of these areas are recognized and respected by all those with land management authority over the area. It could also support landscape-level planning processes beyond what is required under FSC certification (e.g. regional land use planning, regional assessments etc.) as well as help to build consensus on what could contribute to other GBF targets (e.g. Targets 2 and 10).

G. FSC monitoring and audit requirements provide assurance of conservation outcomes

FSC certification requires monitoring of progress towards management objectives, the impacts of management activities and the environmental condition of the monitoring unit (Principle 8), making a summary of results publicly available, and feeding the outcomes of the monitoring into the planning process to inform adaptive management decisions.

This monitoring program could provide the information necessary to demonstrate that conservation outcomes are being met – a key criterion for OECMs.

FSC's audit requirements also provide additional certainty that the requirements of the FSC Principles, Criteria and Indicators are being achieved. While auditors would not audit OECMs directly (given that OECMs are not requirements of FSC certification), the requirements related to DCLs and conservation area networks would be audited. This should provide an added level of certainty that OECMs are ecologically significant as they have been identified according to the standard's rigorous conservation planning processes, that FPIC has been achieved, that areas have been set aside from forest management activities (unless necessary for restoration or maintenance of natural conditions), and that biodiversity conservation outcomes are being achieved.

Currently there is no formal audit system in place for Canada's database of protected and conserved areas (CPCAD). While a commitment was made in 2018 by federal, provincial and territorial governments to develop an audit system to enhance the consistency and quality of reporting to the database[14], and preliminary work has been done, the system has not yet been completed or implemented.

H. Verified Impact can offer an additional layer of certainty as well as potential incentive for protected areas and/or OECMs

FSC standards require forest managers to maintain or enhance ecosystem services and environmental values. A relatively new voluntary program offers a framework to verify and credibly demonstrate these positive impacts in ways that could be used by certificate holders to access ecosystem services markets or other benefits. Certificate holders choose aspects of their operations that they will track and report on, and sponsors provide financial incentives for positive ecosystem services outcomes. There are seven categories of ecosystem services recognized in the FSC Verified Impact program: biodiversity conservation, carbon sequestration and storage, water services, soil conservation, recreational services, cultural practices and values, and air quality.

Ecosystem services claims may, in some cases, provide added 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. OECMs, by their very nature, are likely to contribute to different types of ecosystems claims beyond biodiversity conservation. However, there is a cost to certificate holders for monitoring and reporting on outcome indicators, and willing sponsors need to be found to secure conservation financing related to these claims.

On public forests, questions remain about who would receive the financial benefit from the Verified Impact Claim, given there would likely be multiple governing authorities involved in the recognition of an OECM (e.g. certificate holder, Indigenous nation(s), Crown government, other tenure holders). Pilot projects on private and public forest lands would help to clarify outstanding questions about the potential benefits of Verified Impact claims tied to OECMs, DCLs, and other area-based conservation measures.

[14] One with Nature: A Renewed Approach to Land and Freshwater Conservation in Canada

Recommendations

FSC Canada recommends the following next steps to further leverage the opportunity to contribute to Canada's 30% conservation target through high-quality protected areas and OECMs.

1. That federal/provincial governments ensure they are meeting their international and pan-Canadian commitments to high-quality OECMs and protected areas, including by fully meeting all the pan-Canadian Decision Support Tool criteria;

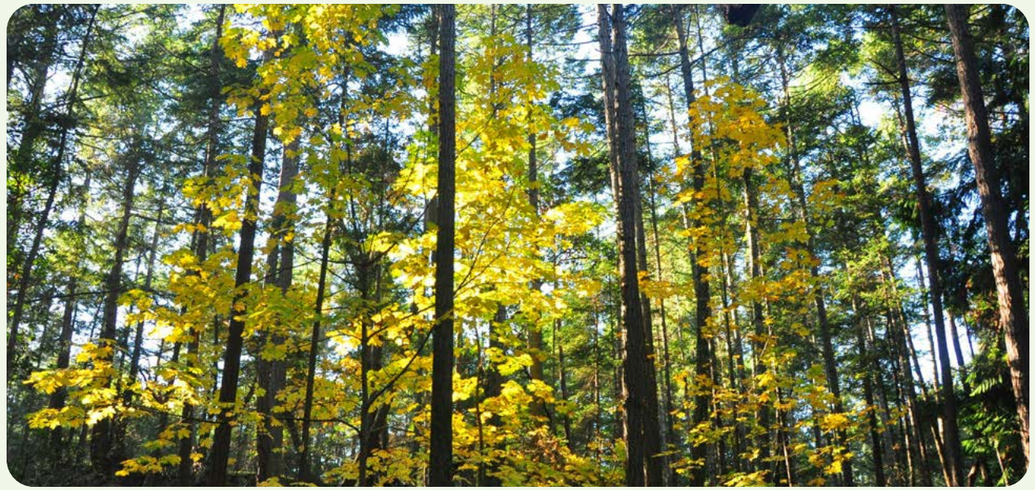
2. That federal and provincial governments recognize that FSC Canada and certificate holders can make important contributions towards establishing and recognizing OECMs and protected areas while also recognizing there are requirements that lie outside FSC's ability to act, particularly on public forests. In most cases additional mechanisms will be needed to fully meet pan-Canadian OECM criteria, for example to ensure all industrial activities are prohibited (forestry and non-forestry) and that conservation endures for the long-term.

3. That governments, Indigenous organizations and NGO partners collaborate to create an inventory of mechanisms across Canada that could contribute, alone or in combination, to fully meeting OECM criteria, for example ensuring areas are permanently conserved, and that all governing authorities prohibit all industrial activities. While beyond the current scope of FSC's work on OECMs, FSC Canada could likely participate as a partner in such a project.

4. That more work be done to explore and clarify how Indigenous laws and stewardship practices and federal/provincial/municipal authorities intersect with regards to OECMs and protected areas.

5. That more work be done to build consensus among governments, rightsholders, NGOs and other stakeholders about what measures are adequate to ensure:
   - Incompatible activities do not occur in OECMs, including industrial activities;
   - Areas are permanently conserved and mechanisms are not easily reversed
   - No governing authorities can jeopardize the conservation regime

6. That more work be done on how to advance landscape-scale planning that would bring together all decision-makers, resource sectors, rightsholders and stakeholders to support more efficient, coherent and effective land use decision-making.



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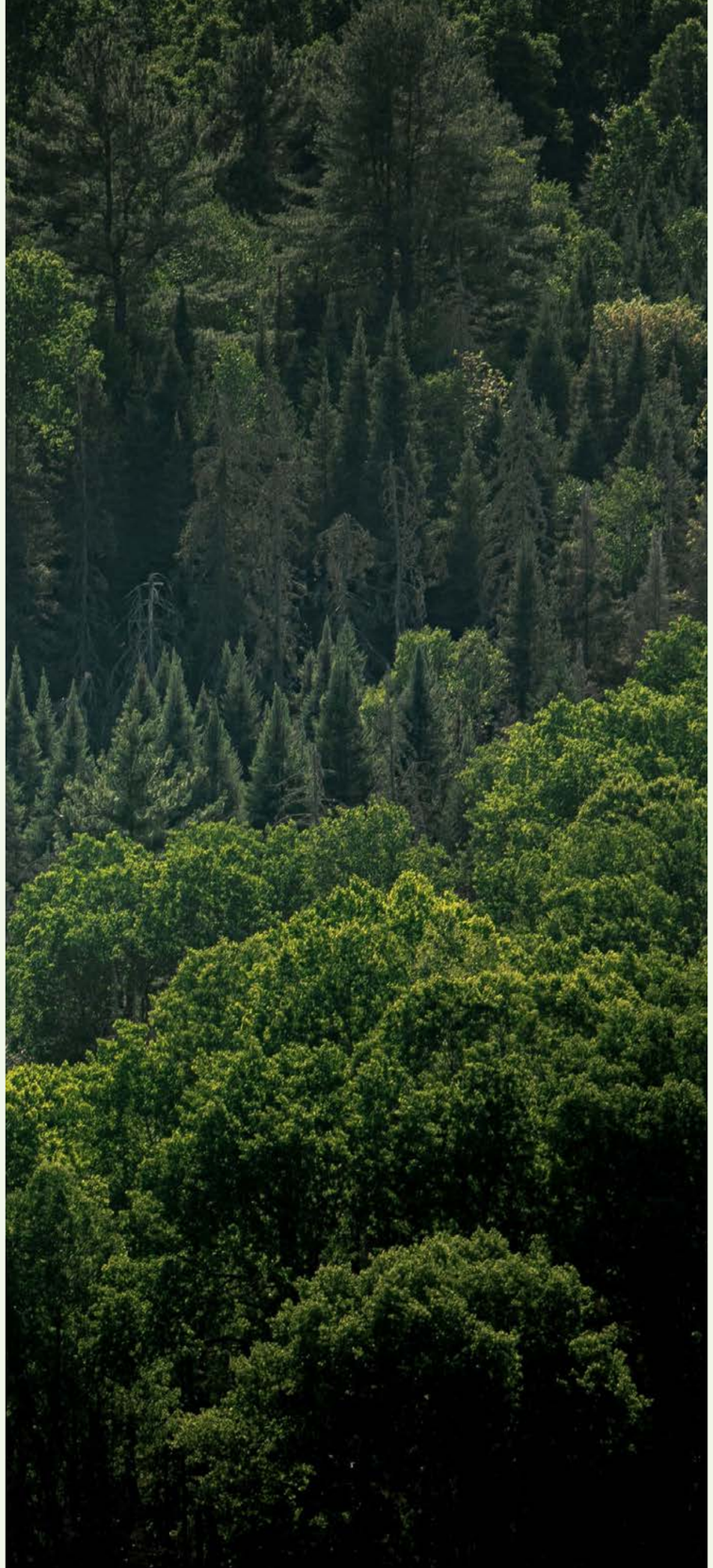

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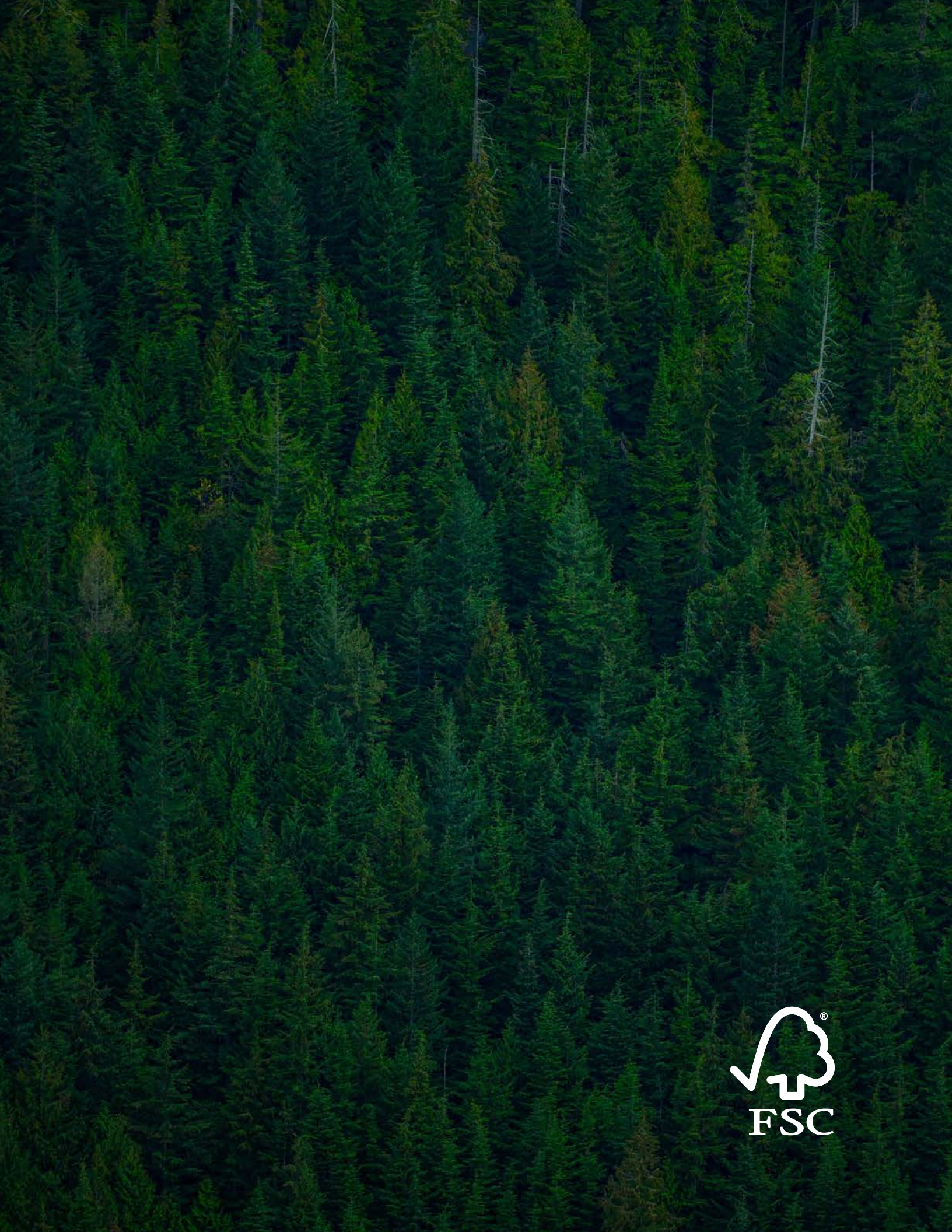
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