

American Tree Farm System<sup>®</sup> Independently Managed  
Group (IMG)  
Certification Standards

2015-2020

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**American Tree Farm System®**  
**Independently Managed Group (IMG) Certification Standards**

**Introduction**

The American Tree Farm System ® (ATFS) Independently Managed Group (IMG) Certification Standards (2015-2020) contain the requirements for the implementation by, and independent certification of, group organizations that manage a number of group member properties under one centrally administered program. The Group Organization holds the single certificate on behalf of the Group Members. This process is referred to throughout the document as “group certification.”

The ATFS IMG Standards take effect on January 1, 2015, for all new Group Organizations. For Group Organizations with current ATFS IMG certificates, 2015 will be an implementation year during which adjustments will need to be made to the program to bring the IMG into conformance with the requirements contained herein. The next regularly scheduled surveillance audit after July 31, 2015, would be required to conform to these standards.

Generally, the Group Organization administers the overall functions of the group and coordinates certain activities, such as:

- ensuring conformance to the AFF Standards of Sustainability,
- administering entry and departure of members,
- maintaining records and reporting,
- conducting ongoing monitoring,
- managing the group certification process.

**Reference Documents**

The 2015-2020 version of the ATFS IMG Certification Standards replaces the 2010-2015 IMG Standard Operating Procedures. In addition to these ATFS IMG Certification Standards, there are a number of other ATFS standards, policies and guidelines that should be followed to effectively achieve independent certification and conform to overall ATFS requirements.

Those standards, policies and guidelines include:

*AFF 2015-2020 Standards of Sustainability for Forest Certification and Guidance*  
*ATFS Eligibility Requirements*  
*ATFS Logo Use Guidelines*  
*ATFS Signage Use Guidelines*  
*ATFS Group Certification Reporting and Invoicing*  
*AFF Disputes and Appeals Procedures*

## Types of Group Members

ATFS has identified three categories of Group Members for purposes of completing annual reporting and submission of annual fees to ATFS. Group organizations seeking certification through the ATFS IMG program must categorize Group Members into one of three categories listed below.

The designation of the three categories of Group Members is for the exclusive purpose of ATFS annual reporting and fees. Reporting forms are released to Group Organizations at the beginning of each reporting year and will detail the reporting requirements for each category.

The three types of Group Members are:

**Category 1** Group Members retain final decision-making authority for management activities to be conducted on their property. This category may include individuals, family ownerships, LLCs and other similar entities. The Group Member may, through contract or other agreements, utilize the Group Organization's services for some or all management activities. Group Members may also participate in group management plans where management decisions and responsibilities are shared between the Group Organization and the Group Members.

**Category 2** Group Members have knowingly and affirmatively delegated full management responsibility for implementation of the AFF Standards to the Group Manager. Category 2 properties are under aggregated ownership as part of an investment fund portfolio. The Group Organization as the management consultant assumes overall operational management responsibility and performs all of the functions required for conformance to the AFF Standards. This category may include properties that meet the ATFS eligibility requirements and are managed by a Timber Investment Management Organization (TIMO). Category 2 Group Members include those entities referred to as Aggregated Management Groups (AMGs) in the ATFS Eligibility Requirements and Guidance.

**Category 3** Group Members are government entities. The property owner may have knowingly and affirmatively delegated full or partial authority for management and decision-making to the Group Manager, or the owner may retain all management authority. The Group Organization may perform some, or all, of the functions required for conformance to the AFF Standards. Examples of Category 3 members are: a local municipality, a public grade-school, a public university, a publically owned watershed authority, a tribal government, a state or federal agency.

## **Section 1. Group Organization Administration**

### **1.1 Legal and General Requirements**

- a. The Group Organization *must* be a legal entity competent to sign agreements with Group Members and to enter into binding contracts with certification bodies and other outside entities.
- b. The Group Organization *must* identify Group Members' category.
  - I. The Group Organization *must* document the group member category (see above section on Group Member types).
  - II. The Group Organization *must* describe roles and responsibilities of the Group Manager and Group Members with respect to forest management decisions and actions with respect to the implementation of the AFF Standards (e.g. plan development, harvesting, monitoring, etc.).
  - III. The Group Organization *must* have a written commitment to sustainable forestry and conformance to the AFF Standards.
  - IV. The Group Organization *must* ensure Group Members have a written commitment to sustainable forestry and conformance to the AFF Standards of Sustainability.

### **1.2 Roles and Responsibilities**

- a. The Group Organization *must* adhere to ATFS eligibility requirements and may further define membership parameters for its Group, if desired.
- b. The Group Organization *must* designate a Group Manager(s) who is responsible for overseeing all of the administrative details of ATFS Group Certification and for ensuring compliance with all applicable requirements.

### **1.3 Group Membership**

- a. The Group Organization *must* inform Group Members of any and all fees associated with administration of the Group, if any, when they join the Group Organization.
- b. The Group Organization *must* hold the ATFS Certificate on behalf of the Group Members.
- c. The Group Organization *must* follow the ATFS logo use guidelines and ensure proper use of promotional claims about the Group Certification.
- d. The Group Organization *must* issue a document to each Group Member that confirms the Group Member participation and coverage by the scope of the third-party certificate.

### **1.4 Group Member Entry and Departure**

- a. The Group Organization *must* ensure that Group Members are notified that they are subject to all of the requirements and privileges of membership in the American Tree Farm System®. Under this requirement, category 1 Group Members must be notified to the individual landowner level and category 2 Group Members *must* be notified to the portfolio level.

- b. The Group Organization *must* define and administer a procedure for admitting Group Members.
- c. The Group Organization *must* maintain a procedure for expelling Group Members if they do not meet the requirements of the AFF Standards, and are not willing or able to take appropriate corrective action.
- d. The Group Organization *must* maintain and update the membership list and ATFS database to reflect entries and departures of Group Members from the Group Organization.

### **1.5 Dispute Resolution**

- a. The Group Organization *must* have a procedure for addressing and resolving disputes regarding conformance with the AFF Standards between and among the Group Members and the Group Organization pertaining to Tree Farm certification.
- b. The Group Organization *must* follow and conform to the AFF Dispute Resolution Policy and assist ATFS in resolving any such complaints.

### **1.6 Maintaining Records of Group Members**

- a. The Group Organization *must* maintain internal Group Member records and provide updated information on a regular basis to the ATFS database.

## **Section 2. Requirements of Participation in the American Tree Farm System®**

### **2.1 Access to the AFF Standards**

- a. The Group Organization *must* make the AFF Standards of Sustainability for Forest Certification accessible to Group Members.

### **2.2 Conformance with AFF Standards**

- a. The Group Organization *must* have a procedure for evaluating conformance with AFF Standards prior to property enrollment under the group certificate.
- b. Management Plan:  
The Group Organization *must* ensure that each Group Member either has an individual management plan or is covered by a larger group management plan where responsibility for management has been delegated to a Category 2 with a qualified natural resource professional.

### **2.3 Eligibility**

- a. The Group Organization *must* have a procedure for evaluating eligibility according to the ATFS Eligibility Requirements prior to property enrollment under the group certificate.

### **Section 3. Internal Monitoring and Reporting**

#### **3.1 Ongoing Monitoring**

- a. The Group Organization *must* establish and maintain a procedure and schedule for conducting ongoing monitoring of conformance with AFF Standards.
- b. IMG inspectors of the Group Organization conducting internal monitoring *must* have completed the current ATFS Tree Farm Inspector training course.
- c. The Group Organization *must* review conformance to the AFF Standards and document the relevant findings.
- d. Where a non-conformance is identified during ongoing monitoring, the Group Organization *must* document the non-conformity and work with the Group Member and other appropriate parties to take corrective action.
- e. The Group Organization *must* ensure implementation of the corrective action and monitor conformity as part of the regular schedule of internal monitoring.

#### **3.2 Annual Reporting to the American Tree Farm System®**

- a. The Group Organization *must* adhere to the annual reporting requirements as defined by ATFS and maintain copies of past annual reports.

### **Section 4. Independent Audit**

#### **4.1 Managing the Group Certification Process**

- a. The Group Organization *must* contract with an accredited certification body to conduct the independent certification. The accredited certification body is required to conduct the audit according to accreditation rule, #27 under ANSI American National Accreditation Body or the Standards Council of Canada.
- b. The Group Organization *must* coordinate the independent audit procedure to ensure the Certification Body has access to sufficient information and Group Member properties to determine conformance to the AFF Standards and ATFS Group Certification Standard.
- c. If the certification audit results in a nonconformity, the Group Organization *must* work with all appropriate parties to take corrective action and ensure timely implementation.
- d. The Group Organization *must* submit a copy of the ATFS Certificate and a summary of the audit report that is appropriate for public distribution to ATFS.
- e. The Group Organization *must* keep the Group Organization's program up-to-date and in ongoing conformance with the AFF Standards.