

|

Canadian Public Involvement in Certification: A Shift in Managerial Responsibility

Rod Beaumont ¹
Kevin Hanson ²

¹ Weldwood of Canada Limited

² Optimum Public Relations

A voluntary paper submitted to the XII World Forestry Congress
Category A5: Forests for People; Roles and Responsibilities
Resubmitted With Revisions, January 2003

Rod Beaumont, RPF
Chief Forester and Senior Environmental Officer
Weldwood of Canada Limited
1055 West Hastings Street
P.O. Box 2179
Vancouver, British Columbia, V6B 3V8
Canada
Telephone: 604-687-7366
Fax: 604-662-2703
E-mail: rod_beaumont@weldwood.com
URL: www.weldwood.com

Kevin Hanson, BJ, LLB
Account Director
Optimum Public Relations
1128 Homer Street
Vancouver, British Columbia, V6B 6M5
Canada
Telephone: 604-662-4560
Fax: 604-662-4503
E-mail: khanson@cossette.com
URL: www.cossette.com

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and not necessarily those of their respective organizations.

Abstract

This paper discusses the implications of the public involvement components of the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) Z809 Sustainable Forest Management certification framework. It draws upon the implementation experience of Weldwood of Canada Limited, the first company to achieve a combination of ISO 14001 and CSA Z809 certification across all of its manufacturing and woodlands operations.

The authors contend that one of the most significant outcomes of CSA certification – and also a largely unforeseen one – is an unprecedented degree of direct and influential participation in forest management on the part of local communities. This role extends far beyond previous opportunities for consultation and dialogue. It arises from the tasking of CSA public advisory committees with the establishment of forest management objectives, and with the definition of indicators of success. While public participants may not yet fully appreciate the significance of the influence they now wield, they have been enthusiastic in exercising it, within a framework that has thus far successfully balanced a diversity of interests. This development is consistent with a broader evolution towards greater local control over forest resources.

The significance of this development is currently masked by a high degree of alignment in Canada between the expectations of forest companies and local communities, with respect to forest management outcomes. There is no assurance, however, that this alignment will be sustained. The current means by which the public managerial authority is operationalized can also be expected to give rise to questions regarding the accountability of the individuals exercising it. Of particular significance may be demands for accountability to broader publics, who are geographically removed from the forest areas in question, but who nevertheless retain an interest in their sustainable management.

Key Words

Certification – Canadian Standards Association – Consultation – Forest Management – Public Involvement – Weldwood – Sustainable Forest Management – Canada

Introduction

Weldwood of Canada Limited has embarked on what, to date, is the single most ambitious on-the-ground application of Canada's national sustainable forest management (SFM) certification standards. In 1999, the company set out to achieve a combination of ISO 14001 environmental management certification at all 20 of its manufacturing and woodlands operations, and Canadian Standards Association Z809 SFM certification³ at all seven of its woodlands operations. Weldwood's ISO certifications were completed in 2000, and its final CSA certificates were awarded in 2001 – making it the first company to achieve both forms of certification company-wide. During 2002, the earliest among the company's CSA-certified operations embarked on the first of the re-certifications they will go through every three years.

The primary factor behind Weldwood's pursuit of this objective was a desire on the part of its employees for validation of the efforts invested in the development of sophisticated environmental management systems. Although little if any impetus initially came from the company's operating communities as a whole, the need to involve them in the certification process was recognized. It was reflected in the definition of the core outcomes Weldwood anticipated from the certification process, one of which was enhanced public participation and trust. It appears now, however, that the impacts in this regard may not have been fully foreseen. It is becoming evident that the reshaping and expansion of the public role in forest management is one of the single most significant outcomes of the particular type of certification Weldwood chose to pursue.

Through the public involvement mechanisms that are a component of CSA certification, communities within Weldwood's operating areas have moved much further along the spectrum of stakeholder involvement than was previously the case. No longer is the public confined to having access to information and providing feedback, or even to dialogue with forest managers prior to the finalization of a plan. Certification has enabled the public – notwithstanding that its role is still commonly referred to as an “advisory” one – to define forest management objectives and to assume actual managerial responsibility.

Whether this development is deemed to be positive or negative depends on one's perspective with respect to the merits of local control and decentralization. Given Weldwood's deep roots in its operating communities, and its significant commitment to public involvement even in the pre-certification era, this development can be viewed as part of a long-term evolution of its relationship with its operating communities. But these are, admittedly, the early days of the application of this new management model. It is not clear that even the public representatives who are most actively exercising these new managerial responsibilities fully appreciate the extent to which their current role represents a departure from the past.

³ Hereinafter referred to as CSA SFM certification, or simply CSA certification.

Two further developments, however, can be expected to make this more evident. The first will be some sort of significant shift in public expectations with respect to forest management – the precise impetus for and nature of which we can only speculate on until it occurs. The second will be demands from the community at-large (and possibly also from less proximate stakeholders) for a level of accountability commensurate with the managerial responsibilities that have been assumed.

Implementing Certification at Weldwood

ISO 14001 and CSA SFM certification are among the systems most commonly being applied by Canadian forest companies. Weldwood and many others are using ISO 14001, with its focus on the underlying environmental management system, as a foundation for the development of an SFM plan. However, the company deemed it important to supplement this with CSA SFM certification given three benefits that such further certification provides:

1. involvement of a formalized public advisory group;
2. a specific connection to a defined forest area; and
3. measurement against SFM indicators derived from internationally accepted criteria.

The CSA certification framework is the product of an open, inclusive and consensus-oriented process, and has the imprimatur of the leading standards-development organization in Canada. Perhaps its most significant distinguishing feature is the extent of its requirements with respect to public involvement. The expansiveness, specificity and ongoing nature of the public's role sets CSA certification apart from other systems such as the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and the Forest Stewardship Council.

Within some Weldwood operating areas, public advisory committees existed prior to certification and were amenable to taking on the CSA-mandated role. In others, the company needed to build the public involvement component from the ground up. It took the most open approach possible, usually consisting of an invitation to participate by means of an advertisement in a local newspaper, and the level of response was typically high. Weldwood has confidence in the representative nature of the groups that have taken shape at all seven of its woodlands operations. The interests represented typically include: municipal government, chambers of commerce, recreational forest users, commercial recreational interests (e.g. guide-outfitters), and in some cases local organizations with an interest in cultural or historic matters. Aboriginal involvement was consistently encouraged, and was secured in a number of instances. Given the small size and close-knit nature of Weldwood's operating communities, any significant gaps in terms of the interests represented were usually immediately evident and proved correctable.

The company necessarily facilitated and provided technical input to the advisory groups. But Weldwood was careful to make it clear that all perspectives were welcomed and would be heard – and that its participation would be, as far as possible, simply that of one participant among many. There has therefore been good participation on the part of interests and individuals whose perspectives have sometimes been critical with respect to Weldwood operations.

As awareness of the process and its significance grew, a strong desire to ensure adequate representation of divergent views emerged within the advisory groups themselves – in part as a means of ensuring the quality and credibility of the output. The committees therefore became largely “self-policing” in terms of adequate representation. Membership has typically remained somewhat fluid over time, providing an opportunity for ongoing adjustment. Similarly, the desire on the part of participants to ensure a well-balanced outcome has fostered a willingness to take contrasting perspectives into account, and to censure conduct that is disruptive to the process. In short, participants developed a sense of ownership with respect to the process and its output.

The common point of departure for each CSA advisory group was the six core SFM criteria established by the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers, relating to: biodiversity, forest ecosystem condition and productivity, soil and water conservation, forest ecosystem contributions to global ecological cycles, multiple benefits to society, and societal responsibility for sustainable development. The groups translated these broad principles into specific objectives applicable within the local, defined forest area under consideration. Common objectives included ones relating to the health of wildlife populations or other aspects of biodiversity, such as an objective with respect to provision of a certain amount of a given habitat type. The groups then determined auditable indicators or measurements of success in the achievement of the objectives. An objective with respect to a habitat type, for example, might give rise to indicators relating to the distribution of a particular age class of forest across a landscape.

The outcome of this exercise formed the basis for an SFM plan against which Weldwood’s eligibility for certification was ultimately judged. Inasmuch as CSA certification requires continuous improvement and regular re-certification, the public role is an ongoing one – involving both monitoring and periodic refinement of the objectives and indicators.

Objectives and indicators are clearly at the foundation of any forest management exercise, and inviting the public to define them represents a radical departure from previous company-driven approaches. While there are numerous other avenues by which the Canadian public can influence forest management, the one opened up by the CSA process is the most direct. It is also one that will remain open for at least as long as Weldwood and other CSA-certified companies wish to maintain their certificates in good standing. Indeed, the strength of the community buy-in with respect to the plans that have emerged out of this process suggests that the public

would seek other means to ensure plans remained in place even if corporate interest in certification waned.

Alignment of Expectations

Weldwood's experience with respect to the management plans that have emerged from this process is that they differ in only relatively subtle ways from the approaches the company was implementing prior to certification. To a large degree, Weldwood and the communities within which it operates appear to be of like minds in terms of at least basic forest management objectives.⁴ One exception, at some operations, relates to recreational access to forests – an objective that did not always previously figure as prominently in management planning as it now does. Public involvement has also led the company to track a range of indicators that is both wider and somewhat different in nature than before. The indicators tracked previously related primarily to legislative prescriptions on issues such as harvest levels and reforestation. Publicly defined indicators, in contrast, typically relate in a more direct way to core ecological considerations such as biodiversity and water quality.

This like-mindedness may be a legacy of a pre-certification commitment to public involvement, on Weldwood's part, that was already relatively extensive. It is also likely a reflection of the relative stability of mainstream public expectations in Canada with respect to forest management in recent years. The last time such expectations underwent a major change was in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when we saw dramatically heightened interest in biodiversity protection, and demands for a more carefully considered balance between forestry and other land and resource uses. Canadian forest companies, in the authors' estimation, have largely caught up with those expectations, and those expectations in turn have remained stable in recent years. There is every reason to believe, however, that changing circumstances will bring about further alterations in public expectations of a similar or even greater magnitude. Indeed, such change may well be on the horizon now.

In broad terms, this change relates to the accelerating pace of globalization, and the heightened competitive pressures associated with it. Forest-dependent communities at one time had a reasonable degree of certainty with respect to their future, based simply on the existence of a good-quality fibre supply and a reasonably efficient capacity to harvest and process it. But those factors alone no longer guarantee prosperity in a world characterized by highly fluid commodity flows, volatile economic trends, and contentious trade policies. As a result, many forest communities are becoming increasingly aware of the extent of their integration into the global economy, and the magnitude of the attendant opportunities and vulnerabilities.

⁴ It should be noted that all of Weldwood's operating communities are heavily forest dependent. The same degree of like-mindedness may not be found in the context of CSA certifications in regions with more diversified local economies.

The specific vulnerability that is the most painfully evident today in many Canadian forest communities relates to the softwood lumber dispute with the U.S. Long-standing American claims of subsidization of Canadian lumber production – claims vigorously rejected in Canada – gave rise in early 2002 to the imposition of substantial duties on softwood imports from the leading producing jurisdictions in Canada. Previous economic contraction in key Asian markets, and heightened competition from other producers who have aggressively moved into them, have reduced the flexibility Canadian producers might otherwise have had to shift sales there in response to American import restrictions. The cost to the Canadian industry has been significant, as have the broader socio-economic impacts, and a definitive resolution to the dispute remained elusive at the time this paper was written.

The softwood lumber dispute is therefore foremost among a range of factors that are causing Canadian forest communities to reassess their place in the global economy, the means by which they can best secure their futures, and their relationships with other stakeholders. Given the magnitude and sometimes traumatic nature of the change these communities are facing, it is reasonable to assume that their expectations may not remain aligned with those of other stakeholders. Indeed, there are already indications in British Columbia of some community discontent with industry and government-supported policy changes aimed at resolving the softwood dispute. It is at a point of divergence of this type that the significance of the public's new managerial role may become more apparent.

An Accountability Deficit?

Given the extent of the managerial role public participants in the certification process play, it is reasonable to query the degree of accountability associated with it. No formalized accountability mechanisms are mandated within the CSA public involvement framework. It is entirely possible, however, that a demand for such formalized mechanisms may emerge, at least in some locations. As the significance of the public managerial role becomes more evident – perhaps as a result of divergence between public expectations and industry preferences – some interests may see value in being able to more directly influence the participants who are deemed to represent them. One obvious means of doing so would be through the use of elections or other formalized means of constituting public advisory committees.

That would address the issue of accountability to the local community and the constituent elements of it which a public advisory committee is meant to directly represent. But it is equally legitimate to ask what degree of accountability public participants in the management process have to other stakeholders – stakeholders who may be further removed from the defined forest area in question, but who nevertheless have a valid interest in its sustainable management.

Certainly the Canadian public-at-large qualifies as such a stakeholder. In decades past, control over Canadian forest resources was highly centralized within provincial

bureaucracies, which typically managed them in the pursuit of broad policy objectives, with varying degrees of sensitivity of local conditions and priorities. While this did not always provide locally preferred outcomes, it did provide for a degree of broad accountability through the political process. In recent years, there has been a notable evolution towards greater local involvement in forest and natural resource management. In British Columbia, this has manifested itself in an ongoing process of land and resource management planning across regional and sub-regional land bases. The public involvement component of CSA certification fits comfortably within this evolution, inasmuch as it provides communities with an expanded opportunity to direct the management of local forest resources. But it stands apart from previous such opportunities in that it is entirely outside a governmental framework, and does not provide for involvement on the part of the representatives of broader publics.

This is all the more significant, given that the CSA public involvement process may in some cases effectively supplant government-mandated processes. One potential instance of this exists within a Weldwood operating area in northern British Columbia. An SFM plan has been completed here as part of the CSA certification process, within an area where the provincial sub-regional planning exercise has yet to be undertaken. There are indications of a strong local sentiment to the effect that the task of SFM planning has been completed, and that land-use planning of the type mandated through the provincial process – to the extent it even remains necessary – should simply mirror the plan that has already been locally developed and endorsed through the CSA process. This raises significant questions from the standpoint of the future role of government and the representation of broad public interests in forest management planning.

Conclusion

Through CSA certification, a significant degree of the responsibility for the definition and development of SFM has devolved from forest companies to local publics. These publics have, Weldwood's experience demonstrates, eagerly taken the pen in hand and defined the core elements of management plans that are now being implemented in defined forest areas. This shift is a profoundly significant one and is likely to be enduring. It can properly be described as a new management model, although it is not clear that this is yet fully appreciated by its participants. The question remains: is this a positive or negative development? The widely held view that sustainability is more likely when the degree of local control is high would suggest that it is. Experience with the implementation of CSA certification in the years and decades to come will provide a means of testing the validity of that proposition. The authors are inclined to believe that its validity will be borne out.

At the same time, it must be noted that some of the outcomes of this shift in responsibility for SFM remain unpredictable at this point in time. Its significance is currently masked by an alignment in public and industry viewpoints that we cannot

be assured will be sustained over time. Conditions currently exist which have the potential to bring about a rupture between public expectations and industry preferences. Such a development will cast into sharper relief the dramatic nature of the shift that has already occurred with respect to control over the development and implementation of SFM. It may also serve to generate demands for formal accountability on the part of participants in the certification process, both to their local constituencies and possibly to less proximate stakeholders as well.