



Background and History of SFI Conservation Impact and the Sounding Board

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About SFI

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting forest sustainability and supporting the linkage between sustainable forests and communities through grant programs, carefully targeted research, direct leadership of critical initiatives, and partnerships that effectively contribute to multiple conservation objectives.

Background on Conservation Impact

To facilitate good decision-making, and to help make the case for the value of sustainability, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative began work in 2015 to quantify the conservation benefits of SFI Forest Management certification and Fiber Sourcing, and the connection between sustainable supply chains and important conservation outcomes. By clarifying these conservation attributes, SFI will help make the link between well- managed forests affected by the SFI program standards, and the public benefits that affect each of us every day.

The motivations to measure conservation values associated with SFI certification are diverse: brand owners seek to understand the impact of their sourcing; conservation stakeholders can engage more effectively if they understand the values that certification can provide; and improved tracking will better equip SFI to provide sustainability related metrics, and contribute meaningfully to conservation outcomes.

To ensure focus, SFI reviewed potential topical areas with key non-profit and academic partners, SFI Program Participants, the SFI External Review Panel, and select brand owners to determine areas that would resonate best with the broadest range of constituents. Recognizing the complexity of assessing conservation values across the enormous footprint of SFI's work, SFI determined to focus investigations in three areas:

- Water quality and quantity
- Climate change related values (both carbon sequestration and ecosystem health and resiliency)
- Landscape-level biodiversity

Formally announced at the World Conservation Congress in September of 2016, The **Conservation Impact Project** actually consists of numerous smaller projects, generated by partnerships within the academic, conservation and research community, and including SFI's own Program Participants. Some projects have been initiated through SFI's Conservation and Community Partnership Grants program, while others are being directed by partners working in concert with SFI. Quantifying the critical contributions of these managed forests will enable the SFI community to understand and promote the conservation values associated with sustainably managed forests, and will facilitate continual improvement. A current list of Conservation Impact projects is available from SFI on request (contact Rocco Saracina, Manager of Conservation Partnerships, rocco.saracina@sfiprogram.org).

The Sounding Board

The "Sounding Board" was formed to bring together the community of partners engaged in or able to inform SFI's Conservation Impact work, to help SFI identify specific pathways to clarify and enumerate our conservation contributions. The Sounding Board does not have a formal structure, but is intended as an open process to help shape this important work, and promote interaction directly between project leaders and experts from a diverse variety of backgrounds. There are no long-term participation requirements, just an open invitation to lend expertise. Effective measurement of Conservation Impact will be founded in credible science, but will also be characterized by resonance with key audiences. The Sounding Board will play a critical role in ensuring both.

The first Sounding Board meeting was convened in June of 2015 with 24 participants, resulting in a recommendation to focus the SFI Conservation and Community Partnership Grants Program on helping to address the research needs relative to Conservation Impact. Building on that guidance, SFI developed protocols for the grants program, and attracted a number of projects in 2016 to build understanding around key themes. Additionally, SFI initiated "Direct Engagement" projects with several uniquely qualified partners, positioned to help us take some key projects to a large scale.

In July of 2016, eighteen members of the original Sounding Board convened by conference call to plan a second face-to-face meeting, which subsequently took place in Washington, DC in October of 2016. The thirty-seven participants, many considered to be the foremost experts in their field, included representatives from Virginia Tech, Nature Conservancy of Canada, American Forest Foundation, Ducks Unlimited Canada, American Bird Conservancy, Saskatchewan Research Council, American Institute of Biological Sciences, NatureServe, U.S. Forest Service, and Canadian Forest Service, and many others. The meeting combined aspects of traditional scientific symposia with an interactive workshop format, to facilitate input into ongoing projects.

The next meeting, in June of 2017 convened 40 participants and provided a focused opportunity for discussion around the three central themes, and additionally resulted in recommendations as to how to enumerate values relative to SFI's Fiber Sourcing programs. The group also introduced the idea of optimizing outcomes across the range of Conservation Impact topics, and also attaining scale of measures and results. This meeting also saw the introduction and agreement

around “communications” as a topic for Sounding Board discussion.

The fourth meeting of the Conservation Impact Sounding Board convened 50 participants in March 2018. Outcomes of that meeting included moves to link related projects, develop work across conservation themes, and review and summarize the results of work of SFI’s Conservation Impact and Conservation Grants completed to date. Participants also recommended an emphasis on SFI’s role as a convener, and on the importance of effectively communicating the conservation value of sustainably managed forests to decision makers and the public at large.

SFI hosted its fifth Conservation Impact Sounding Board meeting in October 2018 in conjunction with the SFI Annual Conference in Westminster, CO. The workshop convened nearly 50 attendees, including representatives from academic institutions, research organizations, and conservation NGOs, as well as a larger than normal (approximately 20%) representation of SFI Program Participants. The workshop focused on the development of cross-topic methodologies for measuring Conservation Impact. Participants also explored the role of communications in delivering results and stories to Program Participants, brand owners, and the general public. With Conservation Impact projects maturing, communications experts should play an increasingly important role in future convenings of the Sounding Board.

SFI hosted the sixth Conservation Impact Sounding Board in April 2019. Immediately following and co-located with the Workshop, SFI and American Forests (AF) co-hosted a Forest Climate Learning Lab, building from the successful series of workshops previously conducted by AF. The combined meetings welcomed over 60 attendees. In addition to a review of work underway, participants investigated the potential to link metrics projects across thematic areas and explored social values related to forests and conservation research. Participants suggested that although the development of conservation metrics is a long-term endeavor, the collaborative nature of research, and the personal stories of project leads, present compelling stories and the opportunity to increase understanding of the conservation benefits of forest management. Participants also recommended that SFI commence an investigation to understand the social values derived from forest certification. There was agreement that measures of “social impact” should be approached with the same rigor as conservation. Any associated analysis should employ social scientists to determine what to measure, how to measure it, and how it should be communicated.

The SFI and American Forests co-hosted Forest-Climate Learning Lab investigated forest practices that can increase carbon sequestration and reduce emissions from wildfire. By convening the Sounding Board and Learning Lab back to back, both workshops benefited from diversified attendance. SFI will look for similar opportunities for collaboration at future events.