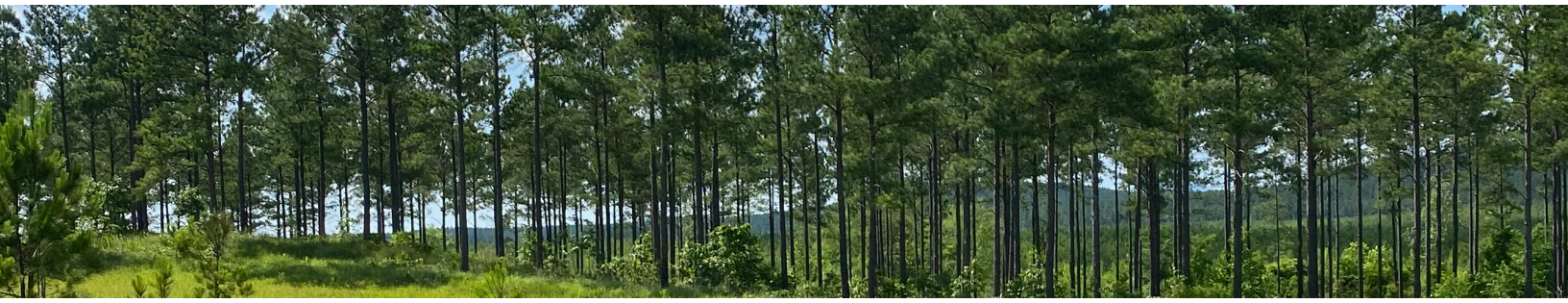
SFI CONSERVATION GRANT

EXPLAINER

QUANTIFYING IMPACTS OF SFI FIBER SOURCING STANDARDS IN GEORGIA



Project Lead	University of Georgia, Dr. Puneet Dwivedi
Awarded	2015
Location	Georgia, United States
Partners	Georgia SFI Implementation Committee Southeastern Wood Producers Association

In 2015, SFI funded University of Georgia to evaluate how SFI Fiber Source Standard influences Best Management Practices compliance and training for water quality in Georgia.

KEY POINTS

- University of Georgia study found that increasing statewide compliance with forestry Best Management Practices (BMPs) is strongly associated with SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard adoption and the corresponding increase in required logger training.
- With only 16% of Georgia's forestland certified, the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard plays a vital role in promoting sustainable practices on non-certified lands across the state.
- The study highlighted the need for better communication and collaboration between stakeholders, such as loggers, landowners, and agencies to enhance Best Management Practice adoption.

WHY IT MATTERS

The southern United States is a global leader in wood fiber production, supplying over half of the nation's timber and supporting thousands of jobs in forest-related sectors. Because 38% of U.S. forests are owned by family landowners who often rely on timber income, sustainable fiber sourcing is essential to both rural economies and long-term forest stewardship. Certification systems, including the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), set standards that go beyond minimum regulatory requirements.

Unique to SFI certification, the SFI 2022 Fiber Sourcing Standard applies to mills and companies that procure wood from lands they do not own. SFI-certified organizations must verify that their fiber comes from legal and responsible sources, and that they protect biodiversity, utilize Best Management Practices (BMPs) to protect water quality, and engage trained professionals. BMPs are practices that protect soil, water, and habitat—such as erosion control, protecting riparian areas, and minimizing runoff. In many states BMPs are supported by both state forestry agencies and third-party certification systems. SFI-certified mills require suppliers, including loggers, to participate in an SFI-recognized education program, which helps ensure BMPs are applied during harvesting. By 2025, over 257,000 resource and harvesting professionals have participated in training since 1995 to ensure understanding of water quality, biodiversity, and other sustainable forest practice requirements. Together, sustainable fiber sourcing and BMPs help maintain forest productivity, support local economies, and protect water and habitat on both SFI-certified and non-certified lands.

In 2015, SFI funded research at the University of Georgia (UGA) to formally evaluate this influence by:

1. Assessing how certification to the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard relates to BMP compliance rates statewide in Georgia.
2. Examining logger perceptions and the role of training in BMP adoption.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

1. SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard and BMP Compliance in the Georgia Landscape:

Objective/Methods

The purpose of the research was to investigate Georgia's BMP compliance rates as they related to implementation of the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard. UGA analyzed the Georgia Forestry Commission Silvicultural BMPs Implementation and Compliance database (1998 to 2015) to determine BMP trends at the landscape scale over time. They mapped the wood mills certified to the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard and added buffers (40mi and 50mi radius) to represent the average size of the wood basket in the southern US. They analyzed the spatial location of the certified sites, their sourcing radii, and BMP implementation rates.

Results

The results of their study indicate that 20 years of implementation of the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard had a positive influence on non-certified forestlands across Georgia. UGA found that the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard likely positively influences over 80% of total forestland in Georgia in 2015 (Figure 1; Dwivedi et al. 2018), an increase from 40% since 2002.

The SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard also contributed positively to Georgia's BMP implementation rate. The BMP implementation rate was 65% in 1991 when SFI Standards were first implemented and has steadily increased and remained above 90% from 2004 to 2015 (Figure 2; Dwivedi et al. 2018). The SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard may be a continued driver for initiated BMP compliance on forestry operations across Georgia.

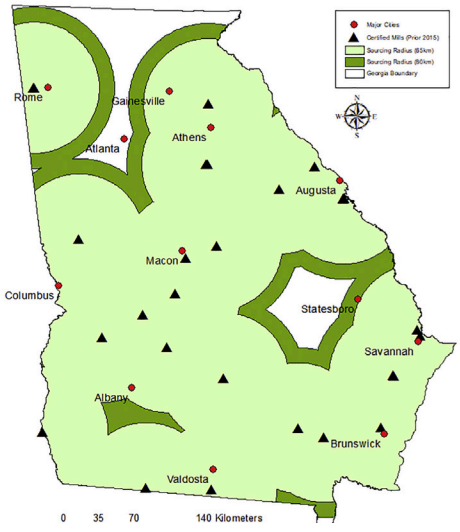


Figure 1. *Wood baskets of mills certified to the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard prior to 2015 (Dwivedi et al. 2018)*

Originally, the Dwivedi et al. 2018 study found that the average BMP implementation rate on harvested sites located within the sourcing radius (about 65 km) of certified mills is about 2% higher relative to harvested sites located outside the sourcing radius of such mills.). A revised 2023 analysis suggested that the effect of BMP implementation per radius was likely smaller; however, the overall relationship was still positive (Kadam et al. 2023).

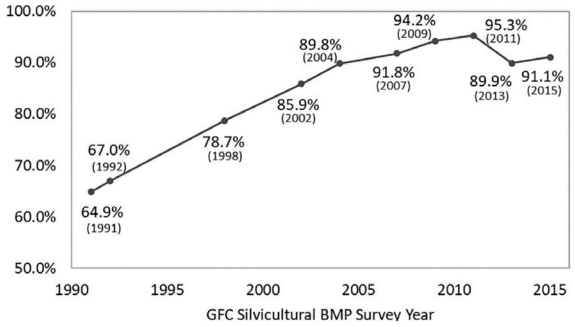


Figure 2. *Overall implementation rates from the Georgia Forestry Commission's Silvicultural Best Management Practices Implementation and Compliance Survey. A decrease in the implementation rate in 2013 is attributed to drought in 2011&2012 (Dwivedi et al. 2018)*

2. Perceptions of the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard through Logger Training

Objective/Methods

Perceptions of stakeholder groups: loggers, private landowners, and agency foresters

In a separate study, UGA examined the role of the Georgia Master Timber Harvester (GAMTH) Program, an example of a logger training program that is required under the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard (Tumpach et al. 2018). They used a SWOT–AHP framework (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats + Analytic Hierarchy Process) to compare perceptions of three stakeholder groups in Georgia: loggers, private landowners, and agency foresters. Researchers initially hosted two focus group discussions with loggers that operated in Georgia to share their thoughts on internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats that influence their perception of forestry BMPs in Georgia (Table 1; Tumpach et al. 2018). Researchers then distributed questionnaires to each stakeholder group and analyzed responses to gauge the importance and priority of these factors for landowner, logger, and public agency stakeholder groups.

Table 1: Factors identified through focus group discussions (Tumpach et al. 2018)

INTERNAL	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESS
	1. Promotes sustainable forestry	1. Lack of landowner education
	2. Maintains/increases access to markets	2. No economic incentives
	3. Promotes a culture of safety	3. Lack of trained personnel
	4. Improves reputation of logging community	4. Inconsistent interpretation of BMP guidelines
EXTERNAL	**OPPORTUNITIES**	**THREATS**
	1. Improved training and education opportunities	1. More regulations and restrictions
	2. Better interagency coordination	2. Insufficient accounting of cost sharing
	3. Maintenance of forest-based environmental benefits	3. Increasing urban populations

Perceptions of logging companies

An additional UGA follow up study analyzed Georgia Forestry Commission data on surveyed harvest sites (2017-2018) for the purpose of comparing BMP implementation rates between GAMTH and non-GAMTH trained loggers (Kadam et al. 2021). This research also investigated perceptions of logging companies regarding BMP policies and impacts of the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard, in order to better understand the differences of BMP implementation rates between trained vs. non-trained loggers and relate this amount of procured wood by certified mills.

Results

Perceptions of stakeholder groups: loggers, private landowners, and agency foresters

In regard to the perceptions of the stakeholder participants surveyed, results suggested that the perspectives of loggers in Georgia view forestry BMPs differently than landowners and agency representatives, with cost emerging as their primary concern (Figure 3; Tumpach et al. 2018). Issues such as the lack of cost-sharing and the absence of economic incentives together accounted for more than 18% of logger responses regarding BMP implementation. The study highlighted the need for better communication and collaboration between stakeholders to enhance BMP adoption.

Key results on the priority categories by stakeholder group:

- **Strengths:** Agencies & loggers ranked "improves reputation" highest; landowners ranked "promotes sustainable forestry" highest.
- **Weaknesses:** Landowners & agencies highlighted lack of landowner education; loggers emphasized lack of trained personnel.
- **Opportunities:** Landowners & agencies prioritized training/education; loggers emphasized maintaining environmental benefits.
- **Threats:** Landowners & agencies pointed to more regulations/restrictions; loggers focused on insufficient cost-sharing/ accounting for BMP costs.

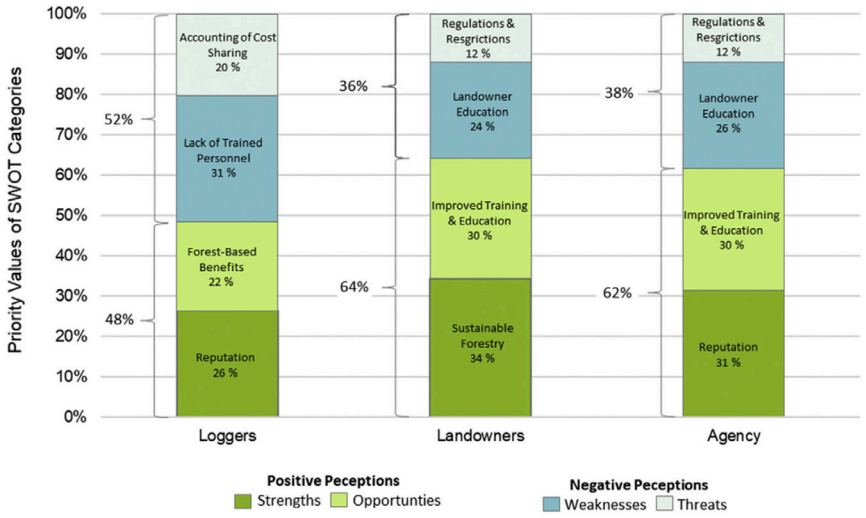


Figure 3. *Highest priority factors under each SWOT category for each stakeholder group (Tumpach et al. 2018)*

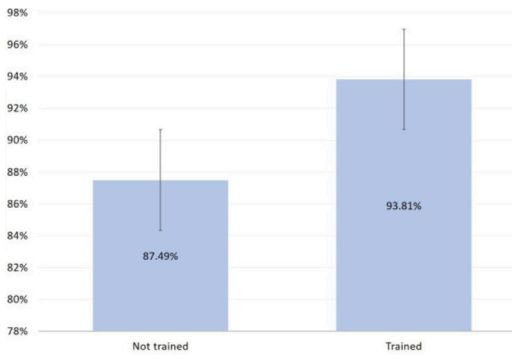


Figure 4. *Comparison between forestry BMP implementation rates of trained and untrained loggers categorized by their status under Georgia Mass Timber Harvester Training Program (Kadam et al. 2021)*

Perceptions of logging companies

Based on responses for the logging company survey (n=46), 55% of responding logging companies agreed that the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard helped increase state-wide BMP implementation rates (Kadam et al. 2021). Furthermore, loggers trained through the GAMTH program had BMP implementation rates 6.3% higher than those who were not trained (Figure 4; Kadam et al. 2021). Certified mills that sourced from these trained loggers demonstrated improved BMP compliance (Kadam et al. 2021). The results suggest the interaction between certified mills and logging companies may have a substantial influence on BMP adoption. The higher rate of BMP implementation in Georgia is associated with certified mills requiring guidance and training, like GAMTH, to logging companies to improve conservation practices. This suggests that increased investment by certified mills in education and technical assistance could help drive positive improvements in BMP implementation rates.

HOW THE PROJECT HELPS THE FIBER SOURCING COMMUNITY

This research demonstrates that SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard extends sustainability benefits beyond certified forestlands. Through mill certification and logger training programs, SFI certification ensures high BMP compliance rates on private and family managed forests. The methodology used in Georgia can be applied in other states to assess the environmental benefits of SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard. The project supports SFI objectives to protect water resources through the utilization of BMPs and expand logger training programs. The research also highlights the diverse perspectives and priorities of stakeholder groups—loggers, landowners, and agencies—which shape the effectiveness of BMP adoption. Addressing these differences is critical: successful fiber sourcing must not only establish standards but also engage and support all stakeholders; recognizing their unique needs, motivations, and constraints.

Taken together, these findings underscore the value of an integrated approach that combines certification, professional training, and stakeholder engagement. By aligning economic, operational, and environmental incentives, the SFI Fiber Sourcing Standard demonstrates how collaborative strategies can enhance forest sustainability, protect water quality, and support thriving rural economies—lessons that can inform similar efforts in other states and regions.

HOW IT RELATES TO THE SFI FIBER SOURCING STANDARDS

Objective 2. Adherence to Best Management Practices

The study shows that BMP implementation in Georgia increased significantly in regions influenced by SFI-certified mills. This reflects the effectiveness of Objective 2, requiring organizations to promote and monitor the use of BMPs to protect water quality and forest soil health, even on non-certified lands.

Objective 3. Use of Qualified Resource Professionals, Qualified Logging Professionals and Certified Logging Companies

Logger training required under the SFI 2022 Fiber Sourcing Standard, including the training incorporated in the GAMTH program, plays an important role in improving logger competence and BMP compliance. This confirms the importance of investing in logger education to advance sustainable forestry practices.

Together, these studies illustrate that the SFI 2022 Fiber Sourcing Standard serves as a catalyst for sustainability, driving positive change well beyond the boundaries of certified forestlands. It highlights the power of certification to engage diverse landowners and practitioners in protecting water resources and supporting local economies—advancing SFI's broader goal of supporting the health and resilience of our forests through sustainable practices.

RESOURCES

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