

The Path to Chain of Custody Certification

by Libby Maurer

Where to start if you want chain of custody certification.

How to Contact Certifying Agencies

FSC Certification:

4 certifying bodies in North America. Visit here for specific contact information: www.fscus.org/certifiers/

SFI Certification:

6 certifying bodies in North America. Visit here for specific contact information: www.sfiprogram.org/files/pdf/certification-bodies-2008-09-09.pdf

at a glance

- When pursuing CoC certification, your first step is to choose a certifying body.
- You will work with a third-party auditor appointed by the certifying body.
- Plan to spend between \$2,500 and \$5,000 to become certified.
- Submit documentation of CoC inventory and staff procedures to the auditor.

If I had a nickel for every inquiry I've gotten about how to obtain a chain of custody certification, I'd have...well, roughly \$2.35. Needless to say, component manufacturers all over North America are asking what they need to do to be able to handle certified wood.

You may not know for certain whether you want to proceed, and that's just fine. For many of you, learning about the process, time to become certified, management of the process, and costs associated with this certification may help you make your decision. Keep in mind that in many ways, chain of custody certification continues to be a moving target. In theory, it is meant to be a standardized process that is consistent among all secondary wood product manufacturers and distributors, but in practice, it is not always executed in the same manner in each instance. So if you choose to proceed, your experience may be slightly different from what is written here. Here's the general framework of the certification.

How the Process Works

No matter if you're aiming for FSC or SFI chain of custody (CoC) certification, the process for each is quite similar. Your first step is to audition and choose a certifying body. (See sidebar for specific contact information.) Many of these certifying bodies are region- or state-specific, so your location may determine which agency you choose.

Conversely, maybe you are constrained by a certain timeframe. (For instance, you are working on a job that requires certified wood and you are six weeks from date of delivery.) If this is the case, you may instead choose your certifying body based on how quickly they can certify you. Be sure to discuss whether they can accommodate your timeframe before making your decision.

After choosing the agency, you'll be required to submit an application or questionnaire. What to expect on the application:

- Basic information about your company and its annual wood products sales.
- If your company has multiple locations, whether more than one location will be certified.
- Details about systems currently in place to physically account for material through inventory and production.
- Whether you intend to apply for concurrent certification with another forest certification program.
- Ideal timeframes for inspection and certification

After the agency receives and reviews your application, arrange for a price quote for the services to be provided. Generally, the price will depend on your proximity to the nearest auditor. Your annual wood product sales may also be used as a factor. If you accept their quote, you will be asked to sign a contract before proceeding.

Next, the certifying body will connect you with a third-party auditor. This is the person you will work with to prepare your facility and staff for chain of custody certification. It is not likely that you will not have an option in choosing who this is; as discussed above, you can assume that the certifying body will match you up with the auditing firm located nearest to you.

A manufacturer in Oregon passed along one helpful tip—ask the auditor early on to help you complete certain paperwork or written statements. "I didn't know to ask, and I wish I had," he said. The auditor will communicate with you the key items to start preparing, and will ask you to send certain information to him or her, like samples of accounting or inventory control documents. Depending on your operation, you may have to draft written procedures to cover the standard requirements, training of key personnel, and customized record-keeping systems.

When the auditor is satisfied that you are prepared, he will schedule an in-person

visit to inspect your facility. He will tour your plant, and inspect it from end to end: receiving dock, material handling and processing operation, and ending with shipping. Manufacturing staff will be interviewed to verify system implementation. Be prepared for staff working in purchasing, sales and marketing to also be asked about systems with the goal of verifying their understanding of CoC in each department. Essentially, the auditor wants to verify that the operation and employees are familiar with and can implement the CoC requirements.

When the on-site visit is complete, the auditor will summarize his findings and prepare a report for the certifying body to review. If your application is rejected, you will have to work with the auditor to refine your inventory procedures and resubmit the application.

Time Proposition/Managing the Process

The amount of time it takes from start to finish depends on many things, according to manufacturers we've talked to. It depends on how prepared you are when you begin, how much time you have to devote to it. And it also depends on how accessible your third-party auditor is. In short, it's not easy to pinpoint the approximate timeframe to become CoC certified, nor the time it will take to manage it.

We've said a couple times that your level of preparedness will be a big factor in how long your certification will take. For instance, if you have no current inventory system in place to account for different SKUs, you'll be required to set one up in accordance with FSC or SFI CoC requirements. Similarly, you will also have to develop written documentation of staff CoC procedures, so factor in some time to write them and to meet with your staff to make sure everyone understands them. You should also plan for several hours of communication back and forth between your auditor, as well as some time to review any documents he sends. It's important to weigh the direct costs of time and labor in this process with the perceived value. Be aware that the road to certification has the potential to be very time-consuming, especially if you'll have to make many internal adjustments.

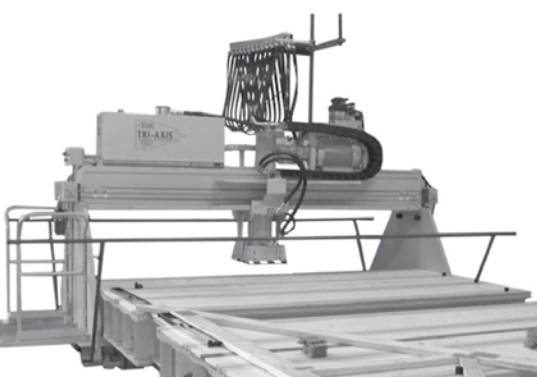
That said, it is a stretch to complete the process and be approved for certification in under a month. Two or three months is generally more typical. Keep in mind that the length of time may be extended if your application is rejected by the certifying body.

Fees

The hard cost is probably the most variable part of the certification. What are you paying for exactly? One certifying body told

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us the cost will depend largely on the costs of auditor travel to your location, and the number of sites your auditor will need to visit. Part of the fee also includes an administrative fee to the certifying body for processing your application and certificate, as well as fees to the auditor for assisting you and preparing your final report. Finally, in the case of FSC (and possibly others), a portion of your fee is applied to your use of its logo in your marketing. When you receive the quote from the certifying body, it will be itemized with a break-down of fees.

One manufacturer on the east coast spent roughly \$3,500 for his initial certification. If you apply for multiple certifications simultaneously, you may save some money. For instance, a manufacturer in the southwest who applied for both SFI and FSC certifications at the same time (through the same certifying body) spent about \$6,000 for the entire process. Depending on the certifying body you work with, you may be required to pay a portion of the total up front; one company made a \$500 deposit. Another company was asked to pay their entire fee up front.

It's also important to note that you will be assessed an annual fee for maintaining your certification. This fee is also variable, but will most likely be less than what you will pay for the initial certification.

The More Prepared, the Better

Still not sure if you should pursue it? Besides talking to your customers about their interest in building green in the next year, you can do some simple costing to determine if, how long and how many jobs it will take to justify your investment.

Just remember—the more prepared you are going into it, the easier certification will be. Do your research, talk to people who have already done it and understand your costs and you're likely to have a good experience. **SBC**

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