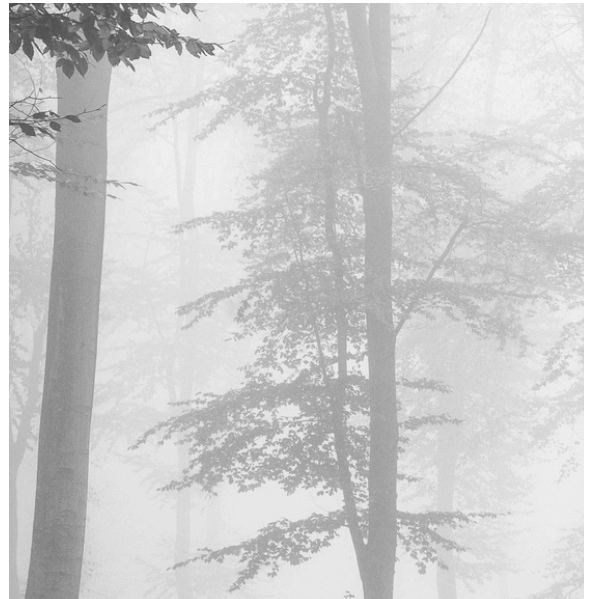


# CLIMATE SMART FORESTRY: A TREND TO WATCH?

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We all know that forests can be good for the climate all on their own. In the U.S., forests sequestered the equivalent of 11% percent of total U.S. industrial emissions in 2021, according to [EPA data](#). About [fifty percent](#) of the weight of dry wood is carbon, which means that trees and long-lived wood products store carbon. But what if there were a way to make forests better for the climate? Making a good thing better is, essentially, the goal of climate smart forestry (CSF): incorporating practices or achieving outcomes that increase the climate benefits of forests.

Yet, the term “climate smart forestry” remains vague in meaning and use. Is it for decarbonizing the building sector? Reducing wildfire? Improving commercial forest operations? Managing public lands? Stakeholders of all kinds are monitoring the evolution of the term, and many are trying to shape the way we define it in one direction or another. This is because stakeholders know if and when a consensus is reached, the way we define the term could impact every corner of the forest and wood products sector. This article provides an introductory orientation to the concept of climate smart forestry, including how key stakeholder groups are engaging with it.



## **IS CSF A PHILOSOPHY OR A NEW APPROACH TO FOREST MANAGEMENT?**

Right now, the answer is both and neither. If that sentence brings dismay, welcome to the challenge of understanding and defining CSF! Originating around 2015, for instance in a [European Forest Institute \(EFI\) paper](#) and with the [U.S. Government](#) (albeit adapted to “climate smart agriculture and forestry”), the phrase grew in momentum in the U.S., especially among NGOs interested in promoting decarbonization in buildings. By the time Joe Biden was elected president in 2020, “climate smart agriculture and forestry” was a key pillar of his strategy for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and a widely used term.

CSF potentially addresses several gaps not addressed by existing sustainable forest management (SFM) frameworks. SFM was developed as a way to “supply goods and services to meet both present-day and future needs and contribute to the sustainable development of communities,” according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). SFM focuses on commercial forestry and lacks an inherent climate component, though it is backed by decades of research and practice. CSF addresses that climate gap and expressly includes all forestland, as well as more explicitly including Indigenous peoples and other underrepresented groups.

However, there’s still not a consensus definition for the framework. The Climate Smart Wood Group, led by organizations like the World Wildlife Fund, focuses on additionality: CSF “increases forest resilience in the face of climate change and sequesters and stores more carbon over time compared to conventional practices.” The FAO layers CSF on top of SFM. Underscoring the lack of clarity on a definition, the U.S. Forest Service just closed the public comment period on an advanced notice of proposed rulemaking that essentially asks for input on how to define the term, despite a version already existing at USDA.

Moving from philosophy to application, there’s not even consensus around the problems CSF should address. Some stakeholders want to see improvements in the climate benefits of working forests, which account for two-thirds of U.S. forests by acreage. Other stakeholders de-emphasize the importance of forests as a climate solution altogether, choosing instead to urge

reduction in human-caused emissions. Meanwhile, management of federal lands remains under scrutiny too, raising the question of whether a more climate-focused management approach would be relevant. Forests in nine states in the U.S. west with high percentages of federal lands are now net emitters, according to recent U.S. Forest Service data.

Part of the challenge in defining purpose and value for CSF is that much of the impetus for CSF came from the policy world rather than the scientific or practitioner community. This results in a “science-practice gap,” as Lauren Cooper and David MacFarlane point out in their recent paper. When policymakers move beyond existing science, the authors say, they run the risk of enshrining policy that does not deliver desired climate outcomes, or perhaps even makes them worse.

It also means that CSF definitions are often being guided by the sustainability and environmental values and beliefs held by various organizations, which may not always be backed by scientific research and are rarely aligned with one another. Some organizations want an “all or nothing” definition, while others are less concerned about a nuanced or expansive definition as long as their corner of the forestry world isn’t adversely affected, including specific local or regional interests that may not align with nationwide needs or goals. The ideal scenario is, of course, an approach that lands somewhere in the middle and provides broad benefits in diverse forest conditions, but it’s hard to envision how that will look, given the fragmentation inherent in the sector, biological complexity of North

America's forests, and the speed at which the conversation is evolving.

Whether it's a new approach to forest management or philosophical framework, there are many players in the game fighting to create the winning definition of climate smart forestry. As momentum for CSF grows, various stakeholders are racing to enshrine their preferred definition, perhaps trusting that the science will follow.

### WHAT (OR RATHER, WHO) TO WATCH

**Environmental NGOs:** Much of the CSF discussion originated with environmental NGOs like WWF, EcoTrust, and Sustainable Northwest. Their goals vary, but are often regionally-specific, and may include ending deforestation (especially outside the U.S.), increasing rotation lengths, and/or preserving old growth and mature forests. Their end goals will typically inform their preferred approach to climate smart forestry, so ENGO perspectives may differ depending on their organizational emphasis and geography of concern.

**Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC):** The AEC community is increasingly responding to requests from clients for net zero carbon buildings. Their questions about climate smart forestry layer in concerns about replanting cycles or mature and old growth forests as they're seeking ways to enhance the sustainability and ongoing availability of a critical building material. Organizations driven by NGOs and universities have arisen to meet AEC community needs, including the [Carbon Leadership Forum](#) and the [Climate Smart Wood Group](#).

**Government:** USDA is the U.S. Government agency leading on climate smart forestry, which it

pursues under the banner of "climate smart agriculture and forestry." Earlier this year, USDA awarded several CSF projects as part of its [Partnership for Climate Smart Commodities](#). The U.S. Forest Service, as mentioned above, is exploring development of a CSF-based approach to managing its lands, which seems like it will incorporate protection of mature and old growth forests, as well. Keeping an eye on various government definitions will be critical, as competing definitions may lead to policy and regulatory conflicts down the road.

**Certification Bodies:** The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) have identified climate outcomes as a potential gap in their certification standards. SFI's [2022 standard](#) includes a CSF component. FSC's new [National Forest Stewardship Standard](#), still in draft form, would incorporate climate outcomes in several spaces where it did not appear before. Yet, only about 95 million acres, or 13% of forests, are certified in the U.S.

**Carbon Credit Standards:** In some ways, carbon credit standards from organizations like Verra, American Carbon Registry, and Climate Action Reserve are the original CSF standards, since they were designed from the beginning to achieve climate benefits above and beyond what a forest would have achieved in a business as usual scenario. These standards have evolved and tightened over time, but of course remain focused on carbon markets. While not leading on CSF definitions, their own standards will inevitably serve as points of reference as CSF is codified.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

As momentum for CSF grows as both a philosophy and a potential new approach to forest management, various stakeholders are racing to enshrine their preferred definition. As of yet, no clear winner has emerged, so savvy stakeholders have to read the fine print to understand what is intended by use of the term. And in the meantime, leaders in the forest and wood products sectors should monitor the conversation in various spaces with an eye to potential policy or funding changes that may emerge as the term becomes more clearly defined.



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