



Procedure

ENQUIRY PROCEDURE

PSU-PRO-10-201 V2-2 EN



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| V1-0 | Initial version approved by the FSC PSU Director in March 2014, following an extensive period of consultation with clients and a 1-year period of in-house beta-testing. | 20 March 2014 |
| V1-1 | Minor changes in the list of designated enquirers on the basis of feedback and advice from FSC Global Development. Expanded list of issues in Annex 2. | 13 May 2014 |
| V2-0 | Updated and streamlined | 21 April 2016 |
| V2-1 | Updated by the subject of derogation requests and minor changes, including the PSU contacts list (now in Annex 3). | 13 June 2019 |
| V2-2 | Minor changes to align with the revised FSC-PRO-01-001, updated derogation template and changes in designated PSU email addresses according to the distribution of issues/topics. | 03 January 2024 |

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this document is to provide clear and unambiguous procedures to process enquiries in relation to the FSC normative framework in a consistent, transparent and timely manner. This document is not supposed to regulate other forms of communication with clients or stakeholders.

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A. SCOPE

This document specifies the requirements and procedures to be followed by designated enquirers and by staff of the PSU for processing, responding and recording enquiries that are related to the FSC normative framework.

As part of the FSC Performance and Standards Unit (PSU) internal Quality Management System, this document is not subject to the review and revision cycle as described in <[FSC-PRO-01-001 V4-0 The Development and Revision of FSC Requirements](#)>.

NOTE: This procedure does not apply to other type of enquiries which are responded to at the discretion of PSU as resources are available.

B. REFERENCES

The following document is indispensable for the application of this document.

For references without a version number, the latest version of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies:

FSC-PRO-01-001

The Development and Revision of FSC Normative Documents

C. TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this document, the terms and definitions included in <[FSC-STD-01-002 FSC Glossary of Terms](#)>, and the following apply:

Advice Note: amendment of selected requirement(s) that is either issued separately or may be added as annex to the relevant set of requirements.

Change request: a documented and justified request from any stakeholder for adding, deleting or changing a requirement of an approved and valid FSC normative document.

Directives: compilations of Advice Notes that are either issued separately or may be added as annex to the relevant set of requirements.

Derogation: is a temporary exemption granted by the FSC PSU Director from conformity with (an) FSC requirement(s).

Enquirer: in the context of this procedure, the person requesting information, interpretation, or derogations on requirements of the FSC normative framework.

Enquiry: in the context of this procedure, a request for information, interpretation, or derogation in relation to requirements of the FSC normative framework.

FSC normative framework: comprises all the requirements to ensure the development, functioning, maintenance and integrity of the FSC certification and accreditation system.

Policy: fundamental requirements and value statements which provide direction to what the certification and accreditation requirements or other requirements need to address.

Standard: provides, for common and repeated use, rules or characteristics for products, services or related activities, processes and methods, aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of outcomes in a given context (adapted from ISO/IEC Guide 2:2004).

Procedure: a set of requirements that regulate process(es) to implement other sets of requirements. Procedures aim at maximizing positive effects of the FSC system.

Interpretation: a formal normative clarification provided by the FSC Performance and Standards Unit to requirements included in documents of the FSC Normative Framework. Interpretations are only valid if provided in writing and published on the FSC website.

Responder: person within the PSU with the relevant competence to reply to an enquiry.

Verbal forms for the expression of provisions:

[Adapted from *ISO/IEC Directives Part 2: Rules for the structure and drafting of International Standards*]

“shall”: indicates requirements strictly to be followed in order to conform with the standard.

“should”: indicates that among several possibilities one is recommended as particularly suitable, without mentioning or excluding others, or that a certain course of action is preferred but not necessarily required. A ‘should requirement’ can be met in an equivalent way provided this can be demonstrated and justified.

“may”: indicates a course of action permissible within the limits of the document.

“can”: is used for statements of possibility and capability, whether material, physical or causal.

D. ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------------|--------------------------------|
| FSC | Forest Stewardship Council |
| NF | Normative framework |
| PSU | Performance and Standards Unit |
| QMS | Quality Management System |
| CB | Certification body |

1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1.1 As per decision of the FSC Director General, the main external clients of the FSC PSU are defined as:

- a) FSC accredited certification bodies (CBs) and Assurance Services International (ASI) with regards to FSC's accreditation and certification requirements;
- b) Network Partners and registered Standard Development Groups with regards to the development and interpretation of Forest Stewardship Standards and Risk Assessments.

NOTE: Certificate holders are the main clients of the CBs, but there is no formal link to PSU. Thus, they are not part of PSU's clientele.

1.2 PSU is committed to reply to enquiries from all stakeholders but will only process enquiries in line with this procedure if received from designated enquirers.

Designated enquirers are:

- a) Known or designated representatives of PSU's main clients;
- b) The FSC Board of Directors and its designated Committees;
- c) Bodies established by FSC according to <FSC-PRO-01-001 Development and Revision of FSC Requirements>;
- d) Partners of joint pilot or research projects.

1.3 Requests for information or interpretation from other enquirers will be processed as resources are available.

1.4 FSC certificate holders requesting interpretations shall be advised to contact their CB.

1.5 Enquiries on Forest Stewardship Standards shall be addressed to the respective Network Partner or registered Standards Development Group, as applicable.

NOTE: This clause does not apply to Forest Stewardship Standards that are under direct control of PSU, i.e. Interim Forest Stewardship Standards and approved Forest Stewardship Standards where no Network Partner or Standards Development Group exists.

1.6 PSU will only provide interpretations on, or derogations to the requirements of the FSC normative framework.

1.7 PSU will not respond to political or strategic enquiries on FSC's position or intentions as this rests with the FSC Board of Directors and the FSC Director General.

2. SUBMITTING ENQUIRIES

2.1 Enquirers should adhere to the following formal requirements:

- a) The enquiry should be submitted in writing (preferably in electronic format);
- b) The enquiry shall be submitted in English or Spanish or French;
- c) Interpretation requests should be submitted in the format specified in Annex 1. Interpretation requests submitted in a different format will only be processed as resources are available.
- d) Derogation requests should be submitted in the format specified in Annex 2.

2.2 Enquirers shall send their enquiries to the concerned PSU Program or Work Area e-mail address, or to the general PSU e-mail address (see Annex 3).

- 2.3 An enquiry may be classified as 'urgent' by CBs where their integrity or the integrity of FSC is at risk if timely interpretation from PSU is not provided and where a justification for the urgency is given. PSU commits to process one (1) urgent request per quarter and CB with highest priority. If it turns out that urgent declarations are irresponsibly used to speed up "regular" interpretation requests, a CB may lose its privilege to declare urgencies. Urgent enquiries shall be identified as "URGENT" in the subject or title of the message.

3. PROCESSING ENQUIRIES

- 3.1 The FSC PSU Director shall appoint one central contact person with the responsibility to manage incoming requests for information and interpretation through the general PSU addresses.
- 3.2 Each PSU Program shall have one or more designated person(s) with the responsibility to manage incoming requests for information and interpretation.
- 3.3 All enquiries for interpretation from designated enquirers should be acknowledged upon receipt. If possible, the timeline for the full response should be indicated in the acknowledgement.
- 3.4 If an enquiry is not within the scope of PSU's responsibility, it shall be redirected to the most appropriate FSC Unit. In case of doubt, the person who received the enquiry shall consult their supervisor.
- 3.5 Enquiries from designated enquirers shall be responded, according to the following timelines from the date of receipt:
- a) Thirty (30) calendar days; or
 - b) Five (5) working days for expedient interpretation requests from FSC-accredited CBs classified as "URGENT".
- 3.6 Other enquiries will be responded to as time and resources are available, however PSU is aiming at a response time of thirty (30) calendar days for all enquiries.
- 3.7 Whenever enquirers indicate that enquiries are relevant to an ASI finding or decision PSU will share responses confirming existing requirements with ASI.
- 3.8 Draft formal interpretations should be consulted with the affected client group (e.g. the CBs) for a minimum of ten (10) calendar days using the FSC Consultation Platform, unless the FSC PSU Director classifies the interpretation as obvious or as requiring an immediate release.
- 3.9 If there are genuine reasons for preventing a PSU staff member from providing a reply within the specified timeline, they shall inform the enquirer about the delay and the expected response time.
- 3.10 All interpretations and derogations require approval by the FSC PSU Director before they can be provided / published.
- NOTE: The FSC PSU Director may delegate approval to the Director General or other senior staff members.
- 3.11 The response shall be provided in writing in a clear and professional manner. Requests for interpretation, or derogations should be responded to by using the agreed format.

4. RECORDING

- 4.1 The responder shall enter interpretations and derogations in the 'PSU INT DER ADV Registry'.
- 4.2 Where an interpretation request may require adding, changing or deleting existing requirements of a normative document, PSU will classify the enquiry as a 'Change Request'. Change requests

shall be collected and recorded by the relevant program for consideration in the next review process.

5. SHARING INTERPRETATIONS AND DEROGATIONS

- 5.1 Formal interpretations provided by PSU are mandatory. Interpretations are considered formal and valid if provided in writing and published on the FSC Document Centre, FSC internal newsletter (Branching out) and circulated in the FSC CB e-mail mailing list.
- 5.2 Consultation report for the interpretations that have been consulted should be shared with the consultation participants directly.
- 5.3 Interpretations are effective from the date of publication and valid until the requirement for which the interpretation is published is either withdrawn or replaced, unless otherwise specified.
- 5.4 Derogations provided by PSU will be circulated in the FSC accreditation e-mail mailing list.

6. INTERIM INTERPRETATIONS

- 6.1 In cases where a formal interpretation by PSU is not provided within the specified timeline (see Clause 3.5, above), the CB and ASI are allowed to issue their own interim interpretation under the following conditions:
 - a) The interpretation shall be based on best professional judgment and the precautionary principle;
NOTE: Neither the CB nor ASI should provide interim interpretations over potentially controversial issues (e.g. conversion, use of pesticides, Policy for Association).
 - b) The CB and ASI shall inform their clients that the interim interpretation might change once a formal interpretation is provided by PSU and that the formal interpretation by PSU may have to be implemented immediately.

7. APPEALS

- 7.1 PSU's clients have the right to appeal any decision by PSU if they disagree with PSU's interpretation or decision according to <[FSC-PRO-01-005 Processing Appeals](#)>.
- 7.2 PSU shall explore all possibilities to settle a dispute informally before it is elevated to a formal stage.

Annex 1 – Guidelines and Template for Interpretation Requests

1. General rules to facilitate processing

1.1 Interpretation requests:

- a) Should be formulated in a way that they can ideally be answered with a **YES** or **NO**, together with a brief justification;
- b) Should be limited to **a single issue**; multiple issues on the same subject should be submitted as separate requests;
- c) Should make a **clear** and **correct reference** to the clause(s) of the respective FSC normative document(s);
- d) Should be accompanied, if necessary, by background information clarifying the request¹;
- e) Should include a suggested response to the interpretation request;
- f) From CBs that require an urgent response should be indicated in the email subject as “URGENT” and should include a justification for the urgency of the request

2. Template for Interpretation Requests

| | |
|---|--|
| Code | <i>To be filled in by PSU</i> |
| Requirement (s) | Clause x of FSC-###-##-### <i>(To be filled in by CB)</i> |
| Publication date | <i>To be filled in by PSU</i> |
| Emergency Request | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>(To be filled in by CB; see also Clause 2.3)</i> |
| Background information | <i>To be filled in by CB (as needed)</i> |
| <i>(Main part of the interpretation request: to be filled in by CB)</i> | |
| Formulate the interpretation request as a question (in bold) | |
| Propose a response (in normal script) | |
| PSU Conclusion | <i>To be filled in by PSU</i> |

¹ This information is mandatory for any interpretation request submitted by **Network Partners** and shall include the information on **WHY** the Network Partner is seeking the interpretation and **HOW** this interpretation will be used. A response will not be provided if this information is lacking or if it's not to the satisfaction of PSU.

Annex 2 – Template for Derogation Requests

| Code | Title |
|----------------------------|--|
| Normative reference | To be filled in by CB |
| Scope | <input type="checkbox"/> Generic (applicable by all certificate holders) <input type="checkbox"/> Specific (applicable only upon individual request and PSU confirmation) |
| Approval | DD Month YEAR |
| Effective date | DD Month YEAR |
| Period of validity | Until DD Month YEAR |
| References | |
| Certification Body | To be filled in by CB |
| Request by CB | To be filled in by CB |
| Rationale | To be filled in by CB |
| PSU Conclusion | xxx |

Annex 3 – Designated PSU e-mail addresses

| E-mail address | Issue / topic |
|--|---|
| psu@fsc.org | General PSU Issues Any issues not covered below or where the contact is unknown or unclear |
| systemdevelopment@fsc.org | PSU System Development General accreditation and certification issues (incl., policy & standard development processes, structure of normative framework, document control) |
| aafsupport@fsc.org | Annual Administration Fee |
| assurance.quality@fsc.org | Assurance Quality (incl. CB Dialogue, CB and Accreditation mailing lists) |
| forestmanagement@fsc.org | Forest Management Accreditation & certification (incl. Principles & Criteria, High Conservation Values, Intact Forest Landscapes, conversion, plantations, ecosystem services) |
| country_requirements@fsc.org | Country Requirements (incl. Standard Development Group registration, transfer & development of standards, IGI, Risk Assessments) |
| pesticides.policy@fsc.org | Pesticides Policy and derogations |
| chainofcustody@fsc.org | Chain of Custody Accreditation & certification (incl. COC groups and multi-sites, reclaimed material, project certification, transaction verification, false claims, core labour requirements) |
| controlledwood@fsc.org | Controlled Wood (CW) Accreditation & certification (incl. CW Strategy) |
| communityfamilyforests@fsc.org | Community and Family Forests (incl. group certification (FM), continuous improvement procedure, SLIMF, simplified smallholder standard, FPIC, communities, ILO) |



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