

45/2025

MOVING BEYOND FIXED THRESHOLDS TO OUTCOME-BASED CONSERVATION FOR INTACT FOREST LANDSCAPES (IFLS)

Passed | Policy Motion

	Proposed By	Seconded By	Seconded By
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Chamber / Subchamber	Environmental / North	Economic / North	Social / South

Policy Motion (Motion text / High-level action request):

Note from the Secretariat: This motion was amended on October 29. The amended motion was accepted by the Motions committee on October 30, 2025.

As ecological, environmental, social and economic conditions vary widely among Intact Forest Landscapes (IFLs); and to remain a credible and effective force for their conservation, FSC shall adapt its approach—replacing fixed IFL protection thresholds with environmentally, socially and economically equitable, viable, context-sensitive and dynamic forest management practices that conserve ecosystem integrity and socio-cultural values within Forest Management Units (FMUs).

The original binary classification (intact vs. non-intact) does not reflect the full spectrum of intactness or the capacity of forests to recover and sustain economic and socio-cultural values. This motion therefore recognizes intactness as dynamic.

The revised approach shall align with and strengthen FSC's High Conservation Values (HCV) framework, which allows active management provided HCVs are maintained or restored. IFLs as of 1 January 2017 are designated 'HCV-2 plus' areas, requiring additional management and robust monitoring measures beyond those applied to other HCV-2 areas, to support outcome-based adaptive management.

FSC Regional/National offices and Standard Development Groups (SDGs) shall facilitate consultations with forest managers, Indigenous Peoples (IPs), Traditional Peoples (TPs), other rights-holders, scientific institutions, and NGOs, ensuring their meaningful involvement in developing landscape specific management and monitoring approaches and indicators, verifying IFL classifications, and assessing whether the approach effectively conserves HCVs and maintains the integrity of IFLs.

To successfully implement this high-level action request, the policy implementation process shall take into account in particular the following:

1. Management

- a. **Forest management activities designed to maintain and/or restore the ecological integrity and socio-cultural values of IFLs replace fixed IFL protection thresholds with immediate effect.** FSC, through its Regional/National offices and SDGs, develops normative requirements and guidance outlining best management practices for IFLs, aiming for consistency across ecoregions, to standardize and streamline implementation across FMUs.
 1. Ecological integrity refers to maintaining resilient forests where biological diversity and abundance are preserved, allowing ecosystems to recover from local disturbances caused by forest management.
 2. Landscapes are, for the purposes of this motion, defined as areas with shared ecological characteristics, as for example outlined in the ecoregions framework (ref. 1).

- b. **In accordance with their FPIC protocols,** Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and Traditional Peoples (TPs) in or connected to IFLs assess whether forests are correctly classified as

IFLs, and/or as Indigenous Cultural Landscapes (ICL), and maintain control over the ongoing management of the ICLs based on their local and traditional knowledge relevant to the implementation of Clause 1a, ensuring the protection of community rights and values.

- c. A technical working group will design a **tiered structure of responsibilities**, based on management unit size and adapted to landscape context (for examples see Table 1).

Table 1. Example of a tiered responsibility structure for Clause 1c, based on management unit size and adapted to landscape context, as will have to be developed by a technical working group.

Criteria	Large Operators	Small/Community Operators
Monitoring Design	Co-develop and/or co-fund landscape specific indicators and HCV assessments.	Use standardized templates and guidance developed at the landscape level.
Biomonitoring Implementation	Implement full spatially replicated BACI or similar designs.	May apply simplified or proxy-based monitoring tools, possibly with third-party or cooperative support.
Financial Contribution	Proportional contribution to shared costs of assessment and data collection at landscape level (e.g., through a monitoring fund).	Contributions adjusted or waived based on economic scale; in-kind support (e.g., community data) encouraged.
FPIC & Stakeholder Engagement	Demonstration of formal FPIC compliance processes for affected communities.	Supported through local institutions or FSC facilitation to ensure meaningful participation without administrative overload.
Reporting Timelines	Strict adherence to predefined reporting deadlines.	Flexibility in timelines allowed where justified by capacity limitations.
Training & Support	Expected to provide or fund training to smaller operators within shared landscapes.	Eligible for FSC or donor-supported capacity-building and technical assistance.

- d. The provisions of this motion remain applicable to IFLs as defined on 1 January 2017, ensuring that their special status under HCV2 is maintained—for example, according to the delineation available at <https://intactforests.org/world.webmap.html> (ref. 2).

2. Monitoring

a. FSC, through its Regional/National Offices and SDGs, develops **monitoring requirements and guidance** for IFLs, aiming for consistency across ecoregions, to standardize and streamline implementation across FMUs, utilizing national biodiversity frameworks where applicable. The requirements and guidance are intended to strengthen context-specific HCV baseline assessments, indicator selection, and adaptive monitoring systems for IFLs and to constitute practical tools for **standardized, consistent data collection**—ensuring robustness, credibility, and comparability across FMUs while reducing barriers to certification. Development and rollout timelines are set for each landscape to guarantee accountability throughout the implementation process.

b. Ecosystem integrity is monitored using **under-the-canopy ecological indicators** and established scientific methods, employing spatially replicated BACI (Before-After-Control-Impact) or alternative designs exemplified in Table 2, and can be built upon current continuous inventory methods in place in attendance to P8, to assess the effects of forest management on habitat condition and species populations. The resulting data will provide credible evidence of whether species populations and/or ecosystem function recover and/or remain stable in the FMU and to what extent these outcomes are attributable to forest management activities.

1. If flaws or inaccuracies are identified on Clause 2a or with the applied monitoring designs, non-conformity(ies) are issued by the responsible Conformity Assessment Body.

2. Monitoring follows strict, **predefined timelines** for implementation and reporting.

Table 2. Examples for monitoring design options for Clause 2b.

Method	Description	Strengths	Limitations
BACI (Before–After–Control–Impact)	Compares conditions before and after management, with both control and impact sites.	Strongest design for detecting cause–effect relationships.	Resource-intensive; requires true control sites and baseline data.
Control / Reference-site comparisons	Compares managed sites with either paired control sites or broader benchmark/reference sites.	Practical and widely used; provides a counterfactual or standard of ecological integrity.	Controls/references may not be perfectly comparable to managed sites.
Gradient / Impact–Gradient designs	Assesses impacts across a spectrum of management intensities (Gradient) or along distance/intensity from a specific impact (Impact–Gradient).	Captures dose–response relationships; works without strict controls; can focus on high-impact areas.	Can be confounded by unmeasured differences among sites.
Before–After / Time-series monitoring	Tracks changes at the same site(s) over time, either as simple before–after or extended time-series.	Detects site-level change and long-term trends; can reveal delayed effects.	Hard to separate management impacts from broader environmental changes.

c. Economic viability is key to successful implementation of requirements. To ensure cost-effectiveness and feasibility, FSC Regional/National offices and SDGs specify landscape specific indicators in consultation with experts and stakeholders. Biomonitoring is targeted, objective-driven, and based on indicators sensitive to the direct or indirect effects of forest management, focusing on areas with the highest risks of biodiversity loss. **Indicator selection considers:**

1. The **species' vulnerability** to direct and/or indirect impacts of logging;
2. The **ecological role** of species and whether these species serve as proxies for other species populations (for example keystone species);
3. That the populations of these species are **monitorable** with methods that are scalable, cost-effective, humane and scientifically reliable. Priority is given to semi-automated methods, such as camera traps and bioacoustics, that integrate into automated analysis pipelines to enable scalable and standardized monitoring with robust spatial and temporal replication (ref. 3).

3. Outcome based adaptive management (as required under Criteria 7.4, 8.1–8.3, and 9.4, with emphasis on robust implementation in IFLs).

- a. Forest managers **periodically review** and revise IFL management approaches based on ecological and social monitoring results.

- b. Mechanisms are established to integrate stakeholder input—especially from Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Peoples—into **adaptive management** processes. FSC Regional/National offices and SDGs support the creation of these mechanisms.

Background Information and Key Documents:

Purpose

This motion provides a **workable, outcome-based** approach to resolving the IFL debate. These changes **will enhance FSC's reach and positive impact on global IFLs**, while aligning with FSC's strategy of increasing certification and reducing complexity to ultimately:

1. Strengthen conservation outcomes;
2. Ensure IPs and TPs in **or connected to** IFLs are involved in validating IFL boundaries;
3. Retain FSC's relevance and leadership in tropical and boreal forests.

Strategy link

The motion contributes to the implementation of Strategy Goals 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.3, and 2.4.

Rationale

Ten years of IFL discussions within the FSC have failed to yield tangible biodiversity protection or inclusion of socio-cultural values in these critical landscapes. Instead, they have resulted in barriers to certification in both tropical and boreal forests. FSC's current approach, centred around thresholds for strict protection, has proven largely unworkable economically and socially.

While protecting the ecological and social values of IFLs is essential and strict protection of IFLs should continue to be a priority, overly rigid and unclear requirements make FSC certification unappealing to forest managers, erode support from Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Peoples, push operations toward weaker standards—or even away from certification entirely—and ultimately compromise conservation goals. Without adapting its approach, FSC will lose its relevance in these key forest regions, undermining its ability to conserve biodiversity in IFLs through robust management standards.

Currently, only 0.6% of global IFLs are FSC-certified, and FSC has virtually no reach or impact in global IFLs (ref. 4). Over half of all IFLs are estimated to experience significant under-the-canopy biodiversity degradation (ref. 5). In contrast, FSC-certified concessions have been shown to maintain intact populations of vulnerable wildlife species (ref. 6).

This motion is not about compromising environmental and social values: It is about achieving their conservation more effectively. **By emphasizing ecological integrity, gaining stronger local support and applying best practices for ecological resilience together with consistent, rigorous, context-specific management- and monitoring systems**, FSC can enhance impactful management of IFLs instead of becoming marginalized in the very regions where its presence is most urgently needed. **Best practices** for maintaining ecosystem integrity may, for example, involve retaining sufficient areas and distributions of old-growth stands in boreal forests to support the recovery of old-growth-associated species, or ensuring adequate canopy cover in tropical forests to preserve habitats for interior forest species.

Additional arguments and information:

1. Improve Conservation Outcomes:

- The current requirements for IFLs are purely remote-sensing based, while ignoring ecosystem integrity and historical anthropogenic activity. The current rules have failed to prevent further degradation and discourage widespread certification. Certifying more IFLs with strict requirements aimed at preserving ecosystem integrity ensures better management and real impacts (ref. 6 & 7).
- Resources spent on managing IFL complexities can be better allocated to other FSC conservation priorities.

2. Expand FSC's Presence in IFLs:

- Prioritizing ecological outcomes and streamlining the certification process with economically viable requirements will position FSC as the preferred system for highly biodiverse IFLs that require effective management.
- Key regions affected include the Amazon, Congo Basin, Canada, Scandinavia, and Southeast Asia.

3. Strengthen FSC's Global Reach and Competitiveness

- Improving IFL requirements and reducing uncertainty will make FSC more attractive compared to competing certification schemes like PEFC, supporting its global goal of expanding certification in natural tropical and boreal forests.

Counterarguments & Responses

- **Claim:** FSC certification in IFLs promotes logging and degradation while they should be protected.
Response: What will happen to IFLs if FSC retains little to no influence in global IFLs? It is much more likely that without FSC, logging occurs under weaker standards, than that IFLs will be protected. FSC ensures best practices, requiring companies to monitor and mitigate biodiversity impacts.
- **Claim:** IFLs will not be strictly protected by FSC, thereby risking their ecological integrity.
Response: Only 0.6% of IFLs are currently FSC-certified, and current requirements may push these areas out of the system. Expanded certification ensures improved management and impactful conservation outcomes across a larger area.
- **Claim:** The threshold approach is essential for IFL conservation.
Response: Thresholds are an oversimplified solution that fails to account for ecological and social contexts. Locally tailored, adaptive management and landscape specific measures are more effective in preserving IFL integrity.
- **Claim:** Biodiversity credits can compensate logging companies for halting logging.
Response: Biodiversity credits are not scalable for global IFL conservation. FSC certification provides a proven, sustainable framework benefiting both biodiversity and people (ref. 6 & 7).

References:

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[Zwerts et al., 2024b, Forests and Global Change.pdf](#)

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