

American Tree Farm System®

Eligibility Requirements and Guidance for Certification V2.2

The ATFS Eligibility Requirements and Guidance for Certification was developed to provide enrollment options, requirements, processes, and guidance for participation in the American Tree Farm System® (ATFS), a program of the American Forest Foundation (AFF). For over 80 years, ATFS has provided recognition and validation of sustainable forest stewardship under uniformly adopted and recognized standards to a community of family forest owners dedicated to caring for their land. By following the eight AFF Standards of Sustainability, woodland owners adaptively manage renewable resources; promote environmental, economic, and social benefits; and work to increase public understanding of sustainable forestry.

The AFF Standards and ATFS Eligibility Requirements are internationally endorsed by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) to provide third-party forest management certification for family forests in geographies where there is demand for certification. The requirements in this document constitute normative language for the purpose of certifications audits.

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Acreage Requirements for ATFS Certification:

Acreage Limitations

- Individual forest owners may enroll **contiguous** properties from 10 forested acres to 10,000 total acres.
- **Independently Managed Group** (IMG) programs may enroll **contiguous** properties up to 20,000 total acres.
- **Individual third-party certificate** holders may include under their certificate **contiguous** properties from 10 forested acres to 20,000 total acres.
- ATFS acreage limits apply only to **contiguous** parcels.

Contiguity and Acreage Determination: The acreage of the entire **parcel(s)** shall be used for evaluation purposes. In cases where a single **forest management unit** spans multiple **parcels** under single ownership, the contiguous **parcels** are the evaluation unit. The evaluator shall determine the total acreage of the **parcel(s)** and deduct non-forested areas to determine the certified forested acreage of the Tree Farm. Forest owners may choose to certify a portion of their entire property portfolio but may not exempt a portion of a **forest management unit** that does not meet the AFF Standards of Sustainability.

Guidance for Acreage Requirements:

Certified acres may include features such as food plots, water resources (lakes, ponds, streams), Christmas tree farms, orchards, and other non-forested areas if they are an integrated part of the forest system. Together, this area is known as the **Forest Management Unit** (FMU).

The AFF Standards of Sustainability for Certification encompass a broad range of management objectives, considerations, and strategies, including management for biodiversity conservation, forests of recognized importance, special sites, and aesthetics, among others. Portions of the **forest management unit** that are held under nonregulatory wilderness designation or conservation easement or are mechanically inoperable due to slope or elevation may not be excluded or deducted from certified acreage.

Contiguity Break Examples

Significant rights of way, under ownership of other entities, may represent breaks in contiguous forest parcels. Significant rights of way are defined as at least eighty-four (84) feet wide. Non-contiguous parcels (or portions of parcels) that lie under a single ownership and management unit but are separated by a break in contiguity such as a significant right of way, road, non-forested parcel, etc. and do not meet the >10-acre requirement to be a standalone Tree Farm may be considered a part of the larger parcel for Tree Farm.

Landowner Requirements for ATFS Certification

Landowner requirements may be delegated to a designated representative (family members, trustees, property managers, qualified natural resource professionals, lawyers, or others) to implement the requirements of the program on behalf of the landowner. However, landowners must be engaged in the decision to pursue certification.

- Ownership shall be **privately held** or held by a **public entity**.
- Properties shall be **nonindustrial** but may be associated with a **small local business**.
- The landowner(s) shall clearly exhibit commitment to sustainable management through management objectives or a management plan.
- The landowner(s) shall demonstrate proactive forest management involvement.
- Ownership goals and objectives shall reinforce the ATFS mission.

Guidance for Landowner Requirements

Conformance to the requirements of the 2021 AFF Standards of Sustainability is the benchmark for meeting these eligibility requirements. Forest owners may demonstrate proactive involvement by collaborating on the development of the management plan, by periodic monitoring visits to the property or by hiring a qualified natural resource professional to oversee the management of the property.

The landowner(s) should be engaged in active outreach efforts or contribute to the effort. There are several ways that landowners can participate in outreach efforts. These include but are not limited to hosting forest-related tours on their property; joining a national, regional or local forestry or landowner association; supporting legislation that promotes private forest health and viability; supporting research that enhances the knowledge and practice of forest management on private forests; writing for publications in support of sustainable forestry on private lands; donating resources to these, and similar, forestry and forest landowner initiatives. If a new landowner does not have a history of doing these things, the landowner should be willing to explore ways to meet the requirement that fit their style and situation.

ATFS reserves the right to refuse certification to any party.

ATFS reserves the right to refuse certification to landowners whose documented actions or values are, in the judgment of ATFS, in conflict with the values and mission of the American Forest Foundation (AFF).

Exceptions

ATFS may review petitions for exceptions and may make eligible for certification, properties that contribute to the greater mission of AFF and the conservation of woodlands in the United States.

Requirements for ATFS Certification of Group Entities

Third-Party Certification Assessments

All certified Tree Farms shall be covered by a third-party certificate issued by an accredited **Certification Body**.

Tree Farms enrolled through an **IMG** shall be certified under the IMG third-party certificate and may be included in a sample population during the IMG certification assessment.

Individual Third-Party Certificate holders shall undergo their own certification assessment by an accredited **Certification Body**.

Tree Farms enrolled through a **state Tree Farm program** are certified under an ATFS national certificate and shall agree to participate, if selected, as a sample during a state program certification assessment.

Exempted Tree Farms¹

All exempted Tree Farms larger than 10,000 contiguous acres enrolled in **State Tree Farm Programs** shall undergo routine third-party audits via stratified random sampling in the 10,000 acre or larger category during state program assessments under ATFS national certificate.

Guidance for Exempted Tree Farms

Tree Farms smaller than ten (10) forested acres or larger than 10,000 contiguous acres that were certified prior to December 31, 2009, were granted an exemption to remain in the state program contingent on continued conformance with the AFF Standards. The focus of the exemption process is at the landowner level, rather than the parcel level.

¹ *“Exempted Tree Farms” were referred to as “grandfathered properties” in previous versions of the ATFS eligibility requirements and guidance. AFF has discontinued use of this term.*

Requirement for Internal Monitoring:

All certificate holders shall conform to the requirements for internal monitoring as described in the following documents:

State Programs and individual Third-party certificate holders:
2021 Internal Monitoring Process and Procedures V2.1.

Independently Managed Groups (IMG):
[ATFS 2021 Independently Managed Group \(IMG\) Certification Standards V2.2](#)

Public Summaries of Forest Management Plans:

Upon formal request, responsible ATFS **State Tree Farm Program** representatives, **IMGs** and **individual third-party certificate** holders shall make available to interested parties the following information:

1. a summary of the management plan components required by the AFF Standards for the properties included within the scope of the certificate, and
2. summary descriptions of the management plans for properties included in the scope of the audit reviewed by the certification body and included in the public audit summary, omitting personally identifiable information, proprietary information, and other confidential information.

Requirements for Internal Management Review:

IMGs shall conform to the requirements for internal management reviews as described in the [ATFS 2021 Independently Managed Group \(IMG\) Certification Standards V2.2](#)

Requirements for ATFS Enrollment (per Tree Farm)

State ATFS Program: Contiguous parcels 10 forested acres to 10,000 total acres.

- Individual owner
- Small Business owner
- Public entity (except State Governments)

IMG Certification: Contiguous parcels 10 forested acres to 20,000 total acres.

- Individual owner
- Small Business owner
- Public entity, including local, State, and Federal Government
- Investment portfolio property

Individual 3rd Party Certificate: Contiguous parcels 10 forested acres to 20,000 total acres.

- Individual owner
- Small Business owner
- Public entity, including local, State, and Federal Government

Guidance for ATFS Enrollment

ATFS Enrollment Procedures

1. To enroll in a **State Tree Farm Program**, contact a program representative (contact information is available on the ATFS website). A qualified ATFS inspector must visit the property and review relevant management documentation. If the requirements of the AFF Standards are met, the inspector will complete and submit a form to recommend the property(s) for certification.
2. State government-owned properties may be enrolled through an **IMG**, or they may obtain an **individual third-party certificate**. To enroll a state government-owned property, contact the ATFS staff representative.
3. **IMG group members** can be enrolled by the **group manager** and his/her trained representatives. To enroll in an IMG, contact an ATFS staff representative to learn if IMGs are offering services in your area (contact information is available on the ATFS website).
4. Entities interested in obtaining an **individual third-party certificate** should contact ATFS staff for more information on the process and preliminary assessment of eligibility.

Leasing Agreements

- **Leasing of Timber Rights:** If a landowner retains control and decision-making authority over their forest management, in accordance with their objectives as reflected in their management plan, the land may be certified by that landowner. Lessees may not certify leased lands to the ATFS Standard.
- **Leasing of Mineral Rights:** Woodlands eligible for ATFS certification that have mining/subsurface leases in place on the property may be certified. However, if disturbance and/or change in land use renders the land no longer in conformance with the ATFS Standards of Sustainability, upon activation of the lease, the property must be decertified.

Glossary of Terms

Certification Body (CB): An International Accreditation Forum (IAF) accredited organization recognized by AFF as trained and approved for third-party auditing to the AFF Standards.

Contiguous: contiguous parcels are discrete parcels that share a boundary line or corner point and are held under the same legal ownership name.

Forest Management Unit (FMU): The forested and non-forested areas included in the forest management of a Tree Farm. An FMU need not be contiguous, may be comprised of one or more stand types, and may span one or more contiguous parcels. During a Tree Farm inspection, the acreage of the FMU is entered as the Forested Acres

Group Certificate: A formal document issued to a **Group Entity** confirming that the **Group Organization** complies with the requirements of the **ATFS IMG Certification Standards** and other applicable requirements of the **ATFS** forest certification system.

Group Certification: Certification of the **Group Organization** under one **ATFS Group Certificate**, consistent with the requirements of the **ATFS IMG Certification Standards**.

Group Entity: A legal entity competent to sign agreements with **Group Members** and to enter binding contracts with **Certification Bodies** and other outside entities. The Group Entity represents the **Group Members**, with overall responsibility for ensuring the conformity of forest management in the **Certified Area** to the **AFF Standards of Sustainability** and other applicable requirements of the forest certification system, including the **IMG Certification Standards**. The structure of the group entity should align with the scale and complexity of the group organization. *Note: **Group Entity** was previously referred to as "group organization" in the **American Tree Farm System "2015-2020 IMG Standard Operating Procedures."***

Group Manager: The individual(s) designated by an **IMG** to manage the administrative elements of the **Group Organization**, including implementation of the Group

Management System and conformance with the **American Tree Farm System® IMG** Certification Standards.

Group Member: A forest owner or manager covered by an **IMG Group Certificate**, who can implement the requirements of the **AFF Standards of Sustainability** in a Certified Area.

Group Members shall have a long-term legal right, tenure right or traditional or customary tenure rights to manage the forest.

Group Management Plan: Documented Information specifying objectives, **Group Management Policies**, actions and control arrangements for the operation and management of a Group Organization. It incorporates planned changes to the **Group Management System** and requirements of the **AFF Standards of Sustainability** that are addressed at the group level.

Group Management Policy: Intentions and direction of a **Group Organization**, as formally expressed by the **Group Entity**.

Group Management System: Set of interrelated or interacting elements of a **Group Organization** to achieve the objectives and outcomes of the AFF Standards of Sustainability and the ATFS IMG Certification Standard requirements.

Group Organization: A collection of **Group Members** represented by the **Group Entity** for the purposes of implementation of the AFF Standards for Sustainability and its certification under the ATFS IMG Certification Standards. A binding written agreement shall be established between a **Group Member** and the **Group Entity**. *Note: The term "Group Organization" is synonymous with "IMG" in the context of the American Tree Farm System IMG Certification Standards. See below.*

Independently Managed Group (IMG): Synonymous with Group Organization. The IMG supports **Group Members** in the stewardship of **Forest Management Units** under a single, centrally administered **Group Certification**.

Individual third-party certificate: Certification to AFF Standards is awarded by ATFS at the recommendation of an accredited certification body after a successful audit of the candidate property(s) and the relevant management documentation.

Landowner: Entity that holds title to the property to be certified.

Non-industrial: An entity whose primary source of revenue is not derived from processed forest products.

Parcel: A distinct and legally defined portion of land with specific boundaries. It may be identified by a unique parcel number or legal description, and it is often used for purposes such as property ownership, taxation, and land use regulation.

Privately held: Not publicly owned; not owned by shareholders whose shares are listed, or traded, on a publicly accessible exchange.

Public entity: Examples: a local municipality, a public grade-school, a public university, a publicly owned watershed authority, a tribal government, a federal agency. Properties owned by state governments must be covered by an individual third-party certification or an Independently Managed Group (IMG) program certificate.

Small local business: The definition of a small business can be found in the Code of Federal Regulations: Title 13 / Chapter 1: Business Credit & Assistance / Part 121: Small Business Size Regulations / Subpart A / Size Standards Used to Define Small Business Concerns. Review the [size standards table](#) to identify the annual receipts and/or number of employees for small business designation. Small businesses commonly associated with ATFS include small business timber tract operations, small business logging operations, small business wood product manufacturers, and small business paper manufacturers, among others.

State Tree Farm Program(s): State Tree Farm Programs are state-based affiliates of the American Forest Foundation's American Tree Farm System. State Tree Farm Programs are independent entities that operate under a cooperative agreement with AFF to deliver state and locally based program elements including landowner education and outreach, inspector training, verifying conformance to the Standards via on-the-ground monitoring, and landowner recognition programs.

Third-party assessors: Qualified natural resource professionals who have completed ATFS required training for third-party assessors and are contracted or employed by an International Accreditation Forum (IAF) accredited certification body.