American Tree Farm System



Third-Party Certification Assessment Primer for State Tree Farm Programs

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***Section 1: Introduction to the Assessment Process***

**Background on the Regional Assessment**

The American Tree Farm System offers affordable and accessible third-party certification to family woodland owners across the United States through a network of State Tree Farm Programs, Group Certification Programs and Individual Third-party Certificate holders. The State Tree Farm Programs are each certified under three regional certificates.

**Northeast**: Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Vermont.

#### The Northeast certificate number is PWC-AFF-446

**West-Central**: California, Colorado, Idaho, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

#### The West-Central certificate number is PWC-AFF-398

**South**: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

#### The South certificate number is PWC-AFF-341

Each region is visited annually as part of a regional certification assessment. During the annual process, a sample of states in each region is reviewed. The selected state(s) and their corresponding Tree Farms represent their respective region that year (see section 2 for information on how the Tree Farms to be visited are selected). The *assessor* from an *accredited certification body* looks for trends in conformance to the 2015-2020 American Forest Foundation Standards of Sustainability (Standards) and American Tree Farm System (ATFS) Eligibility Requirements. ATFS currently contracts with PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to provide these services.

At the state program and landowner level, we refer to this process as a certification assessment, rather than an audit. Landowners and their Tree Farms are representatives of their fellow Tree Farmers in each region and they are being evaluated for their conformance to the Standards.[1](#_bookmark0) The assessment is different from a typical inspection in that their conformance as a group determines whether or not the region continues to be certified. However, like any other inspection, if a landowner is individually found to be

1 The 2015-2020 American Forest Foundation Standards of Sustainability for Forest Certification (Standards) are available online at [https://www.treefarmsystem.org/documents-for-foresters.](https://www.treefarmsystem.org/documents-for-foresters) Guidance is included with additional information on how landowners, designated representatives and qualified natural resource professionals can work towards meeting the requirements of the Standards for ATFS certification.

missing required element(s) of the Standards they must take action to address the areas of nonconformance to remain certified.

Each assessment is part of a broader management-system audit. The *assessors* gather evidence to show that the management procedures of the program are working well enough to provide a certain degree of assurance to support our claim that landowners certified by the program are indeed managing to the Standards.

**There are two main parts to the assessment; (1) state Tree Farm program documentation and process and (2) field visits to Tree Farms.** The field visits will occur during the spring and the number of Tree Farms visited is determined by the sampling requirements detailed in the *accreditation rule* (see Sample Size under section 2). The review of state Tree Farm program documentation and process will occur during the opening meeting (see section 2 for more information) in January.

### Assessment Findings

The assessment is designed to find evidence of *conformance* to the AFF Standards, ATFS eligibility, and program requirements. For landowners, this means meeting the requirements of the Standards in their management plan and their forest management activities and the eligibility for participation in State ATFS Programs. State Tree Farm program’s procedures are evaluated to ensure conformance with ATFS requirements. The *assessors* reviewing each region will review all of the evidence from their visits with landowners or their designated representatives and discussions with *state assessment team* members to determine if there are any trends within the region or state.

This evidence is categorized into different types of *findings*: good management practices, opportunities for improvement, minor non-conformities and major non-conformities.

Good management practices:

The assessment teams will note in their reports any unique examples of exemplary forest management or commitment to the ATFS program. Examples from past assessments include:

* Outstanding efforts to maintain and enhance wildlife habitat;
* Strong landowner commitment to public outreach and education;
* A trend of landowners taking exceptional measures to maintain and enhance forest health.

Opportunity for improvement (OFI):

These issues do not indicate *nonconformity* with the Standards or the *ATFS program requirements*, but indicate potential for *nonconformity* in the future if not addressed[2](#_bookmark1). These could also be opportunities to strengthen the broader program, not only addressing potential future issues.

2 PricewaterhouseCoopers definition

ATFS is required to respond to OFIs, and while corrective actions are not required, we will work with state Tree Farm programs to address these issues and leverage any learning from the finding. Recent OFIs have included evidence of landowners not using contracts for forest management activities.

Minor nonconformity:

A minor *nonconformity* occurs when there is a trend across a state or region where a performance measure or indicator of the Standards or a requirement of the ATFS program is not met. An example of a recent minor *nonconformity* is state programs not completing their Internal Monitoring (Required) Inspections within the calendar year they were assigned.

ATFS is allowed 60 days to develop a *corrective action plan* to address the minor *nonconformity* once it is issued following the field visits. ATFS will work with state programs to develop the plan before it is submitted to the *accredited certification body* that identified the *finding*. *Corrective action plans* are generally regional in scope but may be elevated to the national level if appropriate. ATFS may continue certification as long as the *corrective action plan* is accepted and implemented. The *accredited certification body* will focus on past minor *nonconformities* during subsequent assessments.

Major nonconformity:

A major *nonconformity* occurs when there are several minor *non-conformities* that together lead the *assessor* to believe that there is a serious trend of Tree Farmers not meeting one or more requirements of the Standards or Eligibility Requirements. An example of a major *nonconformity* occurred in the first year of the assessments (2009). Thirty percent (30%) of all management plans reviewed as part of the assessment for the West-Central and Southern regions were missing or failed to address required elements. The *accredited certification body*, PwC, issued a major *nonconformity* for the regions and ATFS was not able to move forward with the certification until the situation was remedied. State programs in each of the regions worked with the landowners to update or find their management plans, which were then submitted to PwC for review. Through the actions of the state programs, inspectors and landowners, the major *nonconformity* was downgraded to a minor *nonconformity*.

A major *nonconformity* can also occur if there is recurring evidence that our proposed corrective actions from previous minor *nonconformities* have not been effective in addressing the issue.

Major *nonconformities* must be resolved immediately in order for certification to continue. Corrective action plans are only developed if they are downgraded to a minor *nonconformity* as those can be resolved over time.

### Third Party Assessment Teams

Lead state contact and *state assessment team*

Each state program shall identify an assessment team and lead contact for the assessment plan development and implementation. Many programs have a Program Administrator

fill this role, but it can be anyone that can contact inspectors and work with landowners to schedule the field visits. The state assessment team should consist of committee members and select Inspectors versed in required inspections, program administration, database management, and geography of Tree Farmers across the state (Area or District Chairs).

There is no “right” number of people for the assessment team. Rather, it is important to simply have the right people, those that can speak for the way the program works and understand the state’s geography.

ATFS staff

ATFS staff are the main contacts between state programs and the lead assessor in charge of approving the audit plan. ATFS staff may join the field visits and will work with the state assessment team to develop the assessment plan.

Lead assessor

Each region has a lead assessor that will facilitate any planning and compile the final reports. ATFS staff will be the main liaison to the lead assessor.

Field assessor

The lead assessor will not be present in the field for all states included in the assessment in a given region each year. Depending on the number of Tree Farms to be visited, a state may have more than 1 field assessor. All assessors are trained to the Standards, are screened for their knowledge of the Tree Farm program, and have experience working with family forest owners.

### Assessment Prep Webinar

ATFS staff will host webinars to discuss background information on the assessment process and provide programs/state assessment teams an opportunity to ask questions of ATFS staff and one another. These webinars will be hosted for a given assessment year’s group of states the summer before the assessment year begins. ATFS will host additional conference calls as necessary or requested by the state programs.

### Assessment Grants

Each state program will receive grant funds to help offset the costs of planning and executing the certification assessment. The grant is distributed in two parts. Each state will receive $1,000 in additional base funding to support planning and executing the assessment. Once field visits are completed, each state will receive $100 per Tree Farm visited. Receipt of these funds is contingent upon on-time submission of required annual program reporting.

These grant funds are unrestricted but programs are asked to report how they were spent in the year-end reporting. Here are some examples of how the funds have been used in the past.

* Reimbursement of personal expenses to inspectors that participated in the field visits (gift certificates, checks, gas cards);
* Reimbursement for mileage, food, lodging and other personal expenses incurred

*by the state assessment team* during the assessment and the planning process;

* Reimburse inspectors for personal expenses to complete Required inspections, update management plans, or verify Tree Farmer viability.

### Assessment Timeline

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| **Fall 2018** | **Webinar.** ATFS staff will host webinars with the 2019 assessment states to review the process and provide an opportunity to ask questions. *State assessment team* members and a lead contact will be confirmed at this time.**Continue data review and clean up**. ATFS staff will review the state’s latest monthly data quality report (available on the ATFS Database website) to ensure that the data sent to the *accredited certification body* on the first business day in January is as accurate as possible. The *assessors* will review the data for quality, noting any issues. The *assessors* also review to verify that Tree Farms larger than 10,000 acres are in the Grandfathered Certification Program.ATFS staff will also work with state programs to identify any other issues that need to be addressed. For example, ATFS works with state programs to ensure landowners have updated their management plans to the 2015-2020 Standards and encourage use of the management plan addendum for this purpose. Part of this work can include a letter to all Tree Farmers to verify acreage, mailing address, other contact information, etc. |
| **October 2018** | **Schedule opening meetings/calls**. ATFS staff will contact states to schedule the opening meetings in January 2019. |

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| **December 7, 2018** | **Submission of all Internal Monitoring (Required) Sample inspections.**Because the *assessors* review the previous year’s required sample in detail, it is essential that the sample be completed, fully entered into the database and each form is filled out as completely as possible. |
| **October – December, 2018** | **Ongoing Database Clean-up**. ATFS staff will review the state’s data quality report on a monthly basis to ensure all of the problem records have been updated. Any changes or updates need to be completed by December 15. |
| **January 2, 2019** | **Final assessment population run from database**. ATFS staff will run the full list of certified Tree Farms in your state and send to the lead assessor. This list will be used during the opening meetings to select the Tree Farms to be visited during the field portion of the assessment. |
| **January 2019** | **Opening meetings**. The *state assessment teams* will meet with assessors in January to begin planning the field assessment.Dates have not yet been determined; for more information, see section 2. |
| **January – March 2019** | **Outreach to Selected Tree Farmers.** Confirm landowner is active, willing to participate and meets the Standards. If required elements are missing, update plan or utilize management plan addendum.**Development of the assessment schedule**. This includes contacting landowners and inspectors, scheduling field visits and collecting management plans to send to ATFS. All management |

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|  | plans, supporting documentation and the final field schedule is due to ATFS six weeks prior to the first field visit. The dates and deadlines for each action will be established during the opening meeting. |
| **March– June 2019** | **Field visits**. The *state assessment teams* and *assessors* will make field visits to the number of Tree Farms required by the sampling scheme. See section 2 for more information. Each region will have a closing call with the assessors to discuss what was observed in the field. |
| **June – August 2019** | **Follow up and development of corrective action plans.** Following the field visits, the *accredited certification body* will send their findings (good management practices, opportunities for improvement and non-conformities) to ATFS staff. State assessment team members are encouraged to participate in an informal closing call following the field visits. This call provides the opportunity for assessment teams to ask questions and ensure the findings make sense to them. Staff will work with state programs to identify root causes and propose corrective actions. Final corrective action plans are due 60-days after the reports are issued. |
| **December 2019** | **Report on corrective action implementation.** A corrective action tracking spreadsheet will be provided to the state program during the corrective action planning process. State programs are required to update this spreadsheet as actions are taken and periodically report back to ATFS staff on individual landowners. |

***Section 2: Planning the Assessment***

**Preparing the Data**

Beginning as early as possible the year before the assessment, ATFS staff will work with state administrators to review and update any incomplete Tree Farm database records.

The assessors look for a complete data set on the first business day in January and will report whether or not the data was complete and accurate. Things to be aware of for the data review:

* Tree Farms with an unknown county;
* Any Tree Farms that should be decertified for any reason but may not have had an inspection and are still certified. For example if a person has knowledge that a Tree Farm has been sold, the property should be decertified. ATFS staff can be listed as the inspector for these types of inspections.
* Tree Farms with fewer than 10 acres or more than 10,000 acres must be grandfathered;
* Tree Farms without location descriptions or with descriptions that suggest they may be multiple parcels.

The data must be cleaned up by December 15, so that a report can be sent to the lead assessor on the first business day in January of the assessment year.

Part of preparing the data is to ensure that your state’s Tree Farmers are aware of their participation in the program and are willing to be included in the assessment. ATFS staff will work with state programs to inform landowners about the upcoming assessment and the need to update their management practices and management plans to the 2015-2020 Standards. This may include a letter that is sent under the State Tree Farm chair’s signature.

### Opening Meetings

Lead assessors and ATFS staff will visit each assessment state for an opening meeting. During the meeting, Tree Farms will be selected for visits (see below for sampling process) and the assessment will officially begin with a review of the program’s certification process. The meetings are usually 6 hours long, including time for an on-site lunch (see DRAFT schedule in Appendix 2). ATFS will cover the cost of the lunch, but requires state programs to make the arrangements. The program should select a meeting location that is most convenient for their attendees and has internet and cell phone access.

At the opening meetings, the lead assessor will review certification related activities including:

#### Inspector training –

How does the state program train inspectors? If the program has assigned this responsibility to a specific position, evidence may include this assignment in committee meeting minutes or bylaws.

How does the state program know that an inspector is currently trained to conduct inspections? The ATFS database is useful for this purpose. A database administrator cannot enter an inspection under an inspector that has not been trained or updated to the 2015-2020 Standard.

What happens if an inspection is turned in by a forester who has not been trained? The database should not allow the administrator to assign an inactive inspector, however if a 004 Form comes through from an inspector that has not been updated to the 2015-2020 Standard, contact another forester to review the inspection on the ground with the original forester and/or the Tree Farmer.

#### Required sample and other inspections

The assessors will review the previous year’s (2018) required sample inspection forms in detail. State programs should bring originals and ATFS staff will bring database output files.

Did the state program complete all required samples the previous year? If not, this will be cited as a non-conformity finding and state programs will have to create and implement a plan to address the issue.

How does the state program distribute, track and process the required sample inspections? For example: the program administrator receives the Required sample files from ATFS staff and distributes to district chairs. The program administrator tracks the progress of each inspection (which district is handling and which inspector and whether or not it has been completed and entered into the database). Program administrator then enters.

How many scheduled or opportunity inspections are completed? This is not a requirement, but it is recognized as being over and above the requirements of the program. Assessors have previously noted inspections in addition to the Required internal monitoring as a good practice.

Are all required signatures or approvals present on the Required sample forms?

Have the standards checklist sheets been filled in with all appropriate checkboxes filled?

#### Data quality maintenance

Who enters the inspections into the database? Is that role described in any bylaws or committee minutes? The *assessors* are looking to ensure the continuity of the program if something happened to the current administrator or whomever inputs the data.

Do you have any plan for reviewing the data in the database? ATFS will assist in reviewing the data to make sure that acreage, county or other missing records are updated. Many states have undertaken a database clean-up and/or Tree Farmer outreach

effort. What has your program done since the last assessment to ensure all participants’ records are valid?

Items to bring to the opening meeting

* Committee bylaws, handbook, operations manual, strategic plan and other governing documents;
* State copies of the previous year’s Required inspections (either hard copies or electronic copies); the state committee is requested to provide the original copies of any handwritten inspections if available; (ATFS staff will also have electronic copies including the Standards Checklist for each form);
* Samples of communications to Tree Farmers and Inspectors (newsletters, direct mail letters, e-news, etc.);
* List of external stakeholders’ names and their contact information. These stakeholders will be contacted by PwC for the public consultation requirements. Stakeholders include representatives of governmental agencies, community groups, forest industry and conservation organizations who are aware of and respond to questions about the program at the state level, but are not directly involved with its implementation or serve on the committee. (5 – 7 per state preferred);
* Internet access;
* Projector;
* Map of the state with sufficient detail to locate Tree Farms identified for field visits (may be digital).

People that should attend the opening meeting

* Assessment team members and lead contact;
* State committee chair, if not on the assessment team;
* State program administrator, if not on the assessment team;
* People who are knowledgeable about the location of Tree Farms in the state to help with the field visit selection process (i.e. area/district chairs), if not on the assessment team.

### Selecting Tree Farms to Visit

All certified Tree Farms in assessment states as of January 1 of the assessment year are included in the list from which the *assessors* will select the field visits. Recognition, Pioneer, member, prospect, heritage, demonstration, windbreak, or Tree Farms in group programs are not included in the sample. ATFS staff will work with the state administrator to review database records to remove duplicate records that are included in both the state program and an Independently Managed Group (IMG).

The sample size must follow the design prescribed by the accreditation rule (https://[www.treefarmsystem.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/1/1ffc0bb4bab4fd01528d60f7bb5](http://www.treefarmsystem.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/1/1ffc0bb4bab4fd01528d60f7bb5) 4e143/pdf/ar27\_9.29.2011.pdf). The size of the sample will depend on the certified Tree Farms in the state and the type of assessment. There are three types of assessments; initial certification, surveillance, and recertification. There is no noticeable difference in the process for each type of assessment other than the number of Tree Farms visited in the field.

The initial certification occurred in 2009 with our first year of certification assessments and will not occur again as long as the system successfully maintains our certificates.

Surveillance assessments occur between certification and recertification assessments (or after the first cycle, in-between recertification assessments).

A surveillance assessment will visit a sample of Tree Farms that is 60% of the square root of the total number of certified Tree Farms in the state. A recertification assessment, which occurs every five years, will visit a sample of Tree Farm that is 80% of the square root of the total number of certified Tree Farms. All of the regional certificates are scheduled for surveillance assessments in 2019.

**Example:** A state with 1,000 certified Tree Farms will organize 32 Tree Farm visits for the *assessors* (1000 = 31.6; round up to next whole number). If the same state was visited during a surveillance year, the program will to organize 19 Tree Farm (31.6 x 0.6 =18.96; round up to next whole number). If the state is visited during a recertification year, then 26 Tree Farm visits are required (31.6 x

0.8 = 25.28; round up to next whole number).

Once the total sample size is identified, *assessors* will need to be sure to meet the acreage distribution requirements of the accreditation rule. The sample must include certain number of Tree Farms in each acre category according to the proportion of Tree Farms in each acre category. The five acre categories are: (1) 10 – 100 acres, (2) 101-500 acres, (3)

501 – 1000 acres, (4) 1000-10,000 acres, (5) 10,001 acres plus (Only Grandfathered Tree Farms participating in the Grandfathered Tree Farm Certification Program may be in the 10,001 acre plus category.)

**Example:** A state with 10% of the total acreage in their state certified under Tree Farms in acre category 1 (10 -100 acres) will have 10% of the Tree Farms visited as part of the assessment sample in acre category 1.

Tree Farm Selection Process The specific Tree Farms to be visited are selected for a variety of reasons by *assessors* with input from the *state assessment team*. There is no one way to select the Tree Farms, but *assessors* will be looking to select Tree Farms that fill certain risk categories. These categories may include Tree Farms that have not been inspected in more than 5 or 10 years, Tree Farms that received their initial certification recently, Tree Farms that have been inspected as part of the Required sample, those that have been inspected as part of any other inspections conducted by the program, Tree Farms that have had recent management activities, Tree Farms in different geographies of the state and Tree Farms that may have special sites. The *assessors* will also take into account driving time and attempt to cluster Tree Farms as appropriate while ensuring that the visits provide an adequate representation of the program across the state. State program expertise is crucial in helping to identify potential Tree Farms to visit as part of the assessment.

The lead assessor will have the full roster of Tree Farms in the state as of January 1 and will sort this by county and acreage. The *assessor* will select a property at random and will ask the *state assessment team* members around the table if they know anything about the property. Once a few properties have been selected, an important question will be how a property will fit into a possible route within the state. The final route will be developed by the *state assessment team* (see below for additional information). This, in part, is why it is important to have a detailed map available at the opening meeting.

All Tree Farms to be visited in each state will be selected by the end of the opening meeting.

Replacements

*State assessment team* need to begin contacting landowners and inspectors as soon as the Tree Farms are selected. As Tree Farmers are contacted, there may be situations where the *state assessment team* feels the property cannot be included in the final sample.

Reasons could include:

* Landowner has passed on and the property is in probate or heirs are not interested in participating in the program;
* Program cannot locate the landowner and has to decertify the property due to missing owner;
* Property has been sold or a portion of the Tree Farm has been sold so that it no longer fits the acreage category.

In case of an issue, *state assessment team* must inform ATFS staff as soon as possible with written notice of the Tree Farm to be replaced, reason for replacement and, unless alternates were identified during the opening meeting, two (2) candidates for replacement from the same acre category and generally along the proposed route of travel.

Replacement candidates need to be vetted ahead of nomination to prevent their replacement, which has previously led to a *nonconformity*. The two candidates will be forwarded to the lead assessor, with a decision being made usually within 48 hours by the lead assessor.

Participation

Some landowners will decide that they do not want to participate in the third-party assessment. They may be hesitant about participating because they do not feel that they understand enough about the purpose of the assessment and what is expected of them. If after learning more about the process, the landowner refuses to participate then all their Tree Farms must be decertified.

### Contacting Landowners and Inspectors

Once the field sample is selected, *state assessment team* needs to begin contacting landowners and inspectors to gain permission to visit the property and determine their availability (day and time). ATFS staff is happy to work with state programs to implement a strategy that works best for their state. Some assessment teams call the landowners directly, others connect with the District/Area Chairs and inspectors. If helpful, ATFS staff can work with assessment teams to draft letters or provide talking points for calls to landowners and inspectors

Many *state assessment teams* choose to contact inspectors before landowners. In this option, the state contacts the forester that last inspected the selected properties and inspectors are then given the opportunity to contact the selected landowners. The advantage is the initial contact with landowners regarding the assessment is made by someone that they already know. State programs that have used this option have found that it is helpful for setting a positive tone among landowners and encourages participation by the inspector

Ideally, both the landowner and the inspector are present at the field visit. This provides the opportunity to the assessor to understand the relationship and how each contributes their knowledge to support the certification and ensure the standards are met. At a minimum, the assessor will need to meet with a person knowledgeable of the Tree Farm’s management and decision making process.

As a rule of thumb, all communications (committee calls, inspector calls, mailings, etc.) have been more successful when they focus on the Tree Farmer having the opportunity to show off their property instead of being “audited.” This is the main reason for the use of the term “assessment” rather than “audit.” The field visits are a time for the Tree Farmer to inform and illustrate their good management to the assessment team.

Follow up calls and emails to landowners are necessary to schedule the field visits. Calls are helpful to identify if there is a need for replacement Tree Farms. The sooner the Tree Farmers are contacted (either by the state assessment team, through a letter, or by the inspector) the easier it will be to gather all the information and documentation needed and ensure all sites will have a representative present to discuss forest management with the assessor.

Sample of confirmation letter to Tree Farmer:

Dear [Tree Farmer],

Congratulations on being selected to represent the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) and your state program during the upcoming third-party assessment with an assessor from PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC). You have been selected to host a field visit on your land to highlight your management activities. This visit is a wonderful opportunity to show off the great work you are doing on your Tree Farm.

I am following up on our phone call regarding the logistics of visiting your Tree Farm [Tree Farm #]. The field visits are scheduled for the week of [Date]. We will be visiting as many as five Tree Farms per day, so we will not be on site for more than an hour. Please let us know immediately if you are unavailable on any or all of these days and we will make every attempt to accommodate your preferences in our schedule. If possible, we would like to have your forester join us for the visit. We will coordinate schedules directly with your forester once we receive confirmation of your availability.

Details about the assessment and the field visit are outlined in the included document: *What to expect as part of a third-party assessment with the American Tree Farm System*.

To make the visit most effective, the PwC assessor will need to review your management plan, any supplementary documents and map prior to arrival. Please forward an electronic copy of these documents, if available, or provide your forester with permission to release them for the purposes of the assessment. All information that is provided will remain confidential.

The PwC assessor is particularly interested in learning about any recent forestry-related activities on your property. Therefore, please complete the included PwC pre-planning form and submit the form along with your plan.

I would appreciate receiving the materials as soon as possible and no later than [Date]. If there are any problems, issues, or questions please be sure to contact me right away.

Thank you again for representing the American Tree Farm System during this year’s assessment!

[Contact Name]

[Contact Number]

Sample of informational one-pager about the assessment for the Tree Farmer:

**What to expect as part of a third-party assessment**

**with the American Tree Farm System**

**What is a third-party assessment?**

The American Tree Farm System offers affordable and accessible third-party certification to family woodland owners across the United States. As your Tree Farm signs say, this certification allows you to be recognized for sustainably managing for Wood, Water, Wildlife and Recreation. In order to ensure that the 2015-2020 American Forest Foundation Standards of Sustainability (Standards) are being met and to recognize good forest management, the American Forest Foundation undergoes a third-party assessment of state programs annually by an accredited certification body. ATFS currently contracts with PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to provide these services.

As part of the third-party assessment process, field assessors from PwC visit a representative group of landowners in a geographic region and their Tree Farms to evaluate their conformance in meeting the Standards. In addition to assessing the State Committee’s programmatic efforts, this sample of Tree Farmers represents the entire region’s performance in meeting the Standards and whether the region can continue to be certified. However, like any other inspection, if a landowner is individually found to be missing required element(s) of the Standards, they must take action to address the areas of nonconformance to remain certified.

**What To Do Before the Field Visit**

Gather and review the following documents:

1. Your Management Plan and Tree Farm Map
2. Supporting documentation including the ATFS Management Plan Addendum, recent contracts or permits (if applicable or available)
3. PwC pre-planning form

The map, management plan documents and pre-planning form will need to be submitted to your state ATFS representative or forester several weeks prior to the visit. If you have performed recent management activities that included the use of contracts or permits, please have them available on the day of the field visit.

To make the visit most effective, the PwC assessor will need to review your management plan prior to arrival. Specifically, the PwC assessor is looking for all documentation that shows each Tree Farmer has a management plan as outlined in the Standards (Performance Measure 1.1). Specifically he/she will be looking to see if you plan addresses or considers the following core elements:

* Description of current forest conditions;
* Landowner’s objectives;
* Management activities aimed at achieving landowner’s objectives;
* A feasible strategy for activity implementation (work plan/schedule);
* A map accurately depicting significant forest-related resources;
* A narrative that includes information on and presence/absence of:
	+ forest health;
	+ soil;
	+ water;
	+ wood and fiber production;
	+ threatened and endangered species;
	+ special sites;
	+ invasive species;
	+ forests of recognized importance.

The PwC assessor will also be interested in learning about any recent forestry-related activities that you indicated in your PwC pre-planning form. If you have performed recent management activities that included the use of contracts or permits, the PwC assessor will be interested in reviewing the documents onsite if they are available. The objective of this document review is to confirm that any required permits were acquired as necessary and to look for good management practices of addressing sustainable practices within the contract language. You may omit any financial or volume information you would prefer not to share, as the PwC assessor will not be reviewing these details. Any information shared with the PwC assessor will remain confidential.

**What To Expect On Your Field Visit**

The PwC assessor will be visiting up to five tree farms in one day, making for a long day. Because of this busy schedule, we have to limit each individual field visit to one hour.

Your visit will include:

1. First 15-20 minutes, after introductions, the PwC Forester will talk with you about your forest management and ask any questions he/she might have from reviewing your management plan.
2. Approximately 30 minutes will be spent walking your land with you and your forester. If feasible given access and timing, the PwC assessor will ask to visit an area that have had recent forest management activities.
3. In conclusion, the PwC assessor will provide a verbal review of good management practices that were observed and/or potential findings if there were any issues with meeting the Standards.

If any of the required element(s) of the Standards are found to be missing, then that Tree Farmer must take action to address those elements to remain certified.

There will not be any individual written reports from the PwC assessor, but your state ATFS representative may follow up with you after the regional findings have been made. Any follow up communication or required corrective action will be relayed by a state committee representative.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

### Scheduling Field Visits

Once the sample is selected and the dates during which the field assessors will visit each state have been identified, the *state assessment team* can begin laying out the field route and scheduling visits. *State assessment team*s are encouraged to ask ATFS staff for any help needed, but the route planning is mostly in the *state assessment team*’s hands because of their local knowledge. The number of Tree Farms visited each day will depend upon the driving time between sites and the total number of sites to be visited in the state; assessment time frames are based on 5 Tree Farm field visits each day. Visits are not expected to be more than one hour long (see Field Visit Overview in Section 3). Whenever possible, each field visit should include the landowner and the inspector (or another forester that the landowner works with). If neither can join, it is important to have someone on site that is knowledgeable about the management activities on the property.

State assessment teams will be asked to provide lodging recommendations for each night on the schedule. The field assessors and AFF staff will make their own arrangements but state assessment teams are responsible for recommending accommodations along the planned route. The field assessors do not know the area and rely on local knowledge for this guidance. Whenever possible, and in the interest of safety, it is recommended that hotel rooms are accessed from a secure and interior hallway.

Sample of confirmation email to Forester/Inspector:

Woody,

Thank you for agreeing to meet PricewaterhouseCoopers assessor – Bill Jones (800) 555-1212 – and (Representative) at the Recommended Hotel in Random Creek (intersection of State Rt. 28 at Rt. 12) at 8:00 am on Thursday, April 21st.

As seen on the attached agenda, you depart for one hour visits to:

1. 8:20 – 9:20 am DC-102 Eagle – 4321 Rocky Rd., Center Town (202) 555-1212

2. 10:15 – 11:15 am DC-235 Angle – 8048 River Rd, Outta Town (202) 555-0000

Each one-hour field inspections is expected to progress as follows:

Agenda for a one hour field assessment:

* + :00 Arrival & Introductions
	+ :05 Interview with Tree Farmer and/or forester
	+ :20 Field tour and observations
	+ :50 wrap-up
	+ :00 Depart

Although we would like to spend additional time at each Tree Farm, sticking to a one-hour field visit is the only way to get to all the properties required in the time available. We appreciate your assistance in managing the landowner’s expectation as to the amount of time the assessors will spend on the ground; the visit is not a regular Tree Farm inspection, but just one sample out of nearly 300 that will be visited over a period of 60 days. Individual Tree Farmers will not receive a written report of any site-specific findings.

#### It is your responsibility to stay on schedule so that the next person on the agenda is not waiting.

**Be sure to contact each of the landowners to ensure their participation and the correct property location.**

Attached is the agenda for Bill and the paperwork (management plan, 004 Form, addendums, pre-planning form) for both properties. If there are any problems, issues, or changes please be sure to contact me right away.

[Contact Name and Number]

### Finalizing the Logistics

ATFS staff will work with the *state assessment teams* to finalize the logistics. This includes ensuring all landowners are aware of the assessment and its purpose, all management plans, supporting documentation, pre-planning and 004 forms have been located, filled out, and submitted to ATFS staff, the field visits have been planned and the route finalized. PwC requires that a management activity summary sheet (PwC Pre-Planning Form) be completed for each Tree Farm to be visited. This form will be provided at the opening meeting, with electronic copies sent to lead state contacts (see Appendix 3). The form describes recent management activities and helps the assessor make the most efficient use of time on each site.

Items due prior to field visits:

A complete itinerary using the template supplied is required **not less than THIRTY DAYS** ahead of the first field. Information to be supplied includes state and region (if applicable), sequence for visits, Tree Farm information (number, acres, acre category), arrival & departure times, name and contact information for field representative, and field assessor. Be sure to leave sufficient travel time between Tree Farm visits to ensure timely arrival.

*State assessment teams* must plan for management plans, supporting documents, PwC Pre-Planning and ATFS 004 Form with Standards Checklist to be available to ATFS Staff via email or file transfer website (PDF or Word format preferred) **not less than SIX WEEKS** ahead of the first field visit so that they can be processed and sent to the lead and field assessors of the *accredited certification body*.

Sample of Itinerary Spreadsheet



States are required to submit a final schedule **not less than THIRTY DAYS** before the first field visit. This schedule should include contact information for those meeting and/or escorting the field assessor (for more information on this, see Section 3, executing the route).

In the past, some Tree Farm programs have chosen to hire a consultant to plan and execute the entire field visit portion of the assessment. This consultant can be any individual familiar with the state Tree Farm program. The consultant would be responsible for following up with landowners and foresters to schedule the field visits, planning the route between field sites, gathering lodging recommendations along the route, gathering management plans and supporting documents and forwarding to ATFS Staff. The consultant may be responsible for driving the assessor around to each of the site visits. Funding for a consultant can come out of the assessment funding provided by ATFS.

# Section 3: Conducting the Field Visits

### Executing the Route

Once the schedule has been finalized and sent to ATFS, staff will review for any missing information and send on to the lead assessor and any additional field assessors. The schedule should have dates and times of when each Tree Farm will be visited along with contact information for the individuals the field assessors will be meeting at each site.

The assessors can make their way around each state in a variety of ways.

State Guides

Most states have chosen to use a single guide or several to help the field assessor make their way around the state. The advantage of this method is that the field assessor and *state assessment team* have a chance to talk between visits and the guide is better able to keep the visits on schedule. The guide also has greater ability to adjust plans if necessary should an issue arise. The assessment grant funds (see Section 1) can be used to reimburse any drivers. There are several different ways to use guides.

* **Single field assessor for the state guided by one assessment team member** to visit all sample properties. The state assessment team member and the field assessor travel in the same vehicle, cutting down on the impact on Tree Farmer’s roads and providing the field assessor and assessment team member a chance to talk in-between visits about the program and each Tree Farm.
* **Single field assessor with different guides each day** (or through each region of the state). This helps to spread the time required away from other activities and the field assessor gets a chance to see different perspectives of the state program through their interaction with multiple *state assessment team* members or volunteers. To help facilitate this effectively, the guides should plan to pick the field assessor up at their hotel each morning or coordinate for a drop-off location with the guide before so that the field assessor can ride in a vehicle with each guide.
* **Multiple field assessors each with a guide** may be an option for states with a large Tree Farm sample size where multiple field assessors are needed across the state. The field assessors can each make their way around the state with a guide using either of the two methods described above.
* **Single field assessor in their own vehicle with multiple guides**. This option is slightly different from the others in that the field assessor does not ride in a vehicle with the guide but has several guides through their visit to the state leading the way between Tree Farms. This option does not have the added perk of giving the *state assessment team* an opportunity to talk with the field assessor between visits but does ensure that the field assessor has a guide that is knowledgeable about the roads.

Field visits should last approximately one hour each. It is very important that planners manage expectations of Tree Farmers and local representatives track time on site so the field visits stay on schedule. We wish that we could spend much more than an hour on each Tree Farm, but unfortunately that is all the schedule allows to ensure assessors make

it to each Tree Farm in the sample. Each of the visits will look at previously identified parts of the 2015-2020 Standards depending upon the resources present (i.e. water, T&E Species, special sites) and management practices identified on the pre-planning form.

### Field Visit Overview

The Tree Farm field visit will begin with a brief introduction to the assessment process. The field assessor will discuss the process in a way that opens an informal dialogue with the landowner (or designated representative) about the management of their property.

During this discussion, the field assessor will be gathering information about how the landowner is meeting the AFF Standards by asking about different resource elements such as invasive species, BMPs, FORI, special sites, etc. Following the informal interview, the field assessor will ask to see some recent activity or a specific site on the property. At the end of the one hour long visit, the field assessor will give the landowner (or designated representative) a brief verbal review of what they observed. Each field visit last only 60 minutes.

Agenda for a one hour field assessment:

* + :00 Arrival & Introductions
	+ :05 Interview with Tree Farmer and/or forester
	+ :20 Field tour and observations
	+ :50 wrap-up
	+ :00 Depart

We appreciate your assistance in managing the landowner’s expectation as to the amount of time the assessors will spend on the ground; although we would like to spend additional time at each Tree Farm, sticking to a one-hour field visit is the only way to get to all the properties required in the time available. The visit is not a regular Tree Farm inspection, but just one of many throughout the state and region that will be visited over a period of days. Individual Tree Farmers will not receive a written report of any site- specific findings, but region wide finding are made publicly available.

### Closing Calls

Each region will have an informal closing call after all field visits for the region. The call will be held at a designated time shortly after the last field visit for the region. The lead assessor for the region will review the observations and any draft findings (see Section 1 for definitions). The final assessment findings will be sent to ATFS staff as part of the *corrective action request* (see Section 4). *State assessment teams* have an opportunity on this call to discuss any differences they have with the assessment observation. If an observation does not align with the *state assessment team*’s recollection of the situation or is in conflict with standard practices, this is the best opportunity to make the case as to why the observation should be altered or removed. As a courtesy, PwC has shared the unofficial draft observations with state programs approximately a week ahead of the call for review by state programs. It is anticipated that this courtesy will continue.

# Section 4: Assessment Follow up

### Corrective Action Plans

Third-party certification requires that if issues are found during an assessment, the certifying organization (ATFS) make plans to identify and remedy the root cause behind the observed issues. The *accredited certification body* will issue their *findings* (see Section 1 for more information on opportunities for improvement, minor nonconformities and major nonconformities) after reviewing observations from all *assessors* in each region. *Findings* are based on observed trends for each region. A *finding* can be issued for a specific state if there is a significant trend of non-conformance (see Section 1) within the state.

Following the informal closing calls, the *accredited certification body* will issue *corrective action request* reports to ATFS staff. ATFS is asked to examine the root causes of the observed trends and develop a plan to address the cause. ATFS staff will put together an initial draft response describing the root causes of the observed trends and a corrective action plan. These plans generally combine site-specific and programmatic corrective measures. States will be asked to review the corrective action plans and provide any feedback, making sure that the proposed plans will work for their program and volunteers.

Example: During the first year of ATFS certification assessments, PwC found a significant number of Tree Farms visited as part of the assessment field sample did not have a management plan or their management plan did not meet the requirements of the AFF Standards. ATFS identified 2 root causes of this trend; landowners are unaware of the requirements of the ATFS program due to lack of consistent contact with the program, and the inspector training program did not appropriately focus on the certification requirements of the Tree Farm program.

Corrective action plans are implemented in the short and long term. For example, following the field visits, state programs reach out to landowners that did not have management plans (or their management plan did not meet the requirements). If the landowner needs additional time to update their plan, their Tree Farm can be placed into the Pioneer category. The revision of the inspector training program is an example of a long term corrective action. The training was revised following the first year certification assessment to address the new Standards and will take over a year to fully implement throughout the program. The results of the revised training will take a few years.

### Thank You Letters

Each year, thank you letters are sent to landowners and volunteers that participated in the assessments. It is recommended that the state committee follow up with all of the participating tree farmers and volunteers with a thank you note, which may include general learnings and findings from the assessment that the state committee would like to share.

Thank you notes are also sent by ATFS staff following the field visits to landowners and volunteers. Landowner thank you packets may include a thank you letter, a Tree Farm bumper sticker, and educational information such as a brochure developed by AFF on the Farm Bill programs available for forest landowners. Inspector thank you packets may include a thank you letter with an offer for a Tree Farm logo item. Each state is different in terms of what their inspectors can receive as gifts and ATFS staff asks that states be sure to inform us of any potential issues with an inspector gift. ATFS staff also asks that the state committees keep track of the contact information for all of the assessment volunteers throughout the assessment process to ensure that everyone is acknowledged appropriately.

### 004 Inspection Form Completion

In order to fully update database records, if no nonconformities were found or after corrective actions have been completed, ATFS staff recommend that the accompanying inspector during the field visit complete a 004 Form for each property visited.

### Public Summary Report

Once the corrective actions developed by ATFS (staff with state input and review) have been accepted by the certification bodies, they will issue a final assessment report for each region. This report is a summary of the assessment process, findings and result.

ATFS is required by PEFC to post the report. Because this is a public summary report, no landowner names or Tree Farm numbers will be mentioned.

# Resources

Accreditation Rule:

United States

(ANAB) <https://anab.qualtraxcloud.com/ShowDocument.aspx?ID=1036>

Canada

(SCC) <https://www.treefarmsystem.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/1/c761a77434941c1e54cc097aeee0af4c/pdf/executed_aff_and_scc_mou_122017.pdf>

2015-2020 AFF Standards: <https://www.treefarmsystem.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/2/8070af96d81956cc1a261635e9f7d8cc/pdf/final_eligibility_guidance_jan12015.pdf>

Management Plan Addendum: <https://www.treefarmsystem.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/2/10f7c0e551a9510ed17061811ab6937a/misc/atfs_management_plan_addendum_dec_2015.pdf>

ATFS is happy to provide articles for state newsletters and other publications on the assessment, management plans, or any other Tree Farm related topic. Contact Nephtali Chavez by email at nchavez@forestfoundation.org.

## Appendix 1: Glossary of Certification Terms for the State Primer

*Assessor:* All assessors involved with the Tree Farm certification assessments are vetted for experience with family forest owners and knowledge of the Tree Farm program.

Assessors are selected to visit states with forest types with which they are familiar.

*Accredited Certification Body*: An independent firm that has been accredited by an International Accreditation Forum member organization such as the ANSI-American National Accreditation Board (ANAB) or the Standards Council of Canada (SCC). This accreditation ensures that ATFS is following internationally recognized auditing procedures.

*Accreditation Rule*: ATFS maintains accreditation rules with the ANSI-American National Accreditation Board (ANAB) and the Standards Council of Canada (SCC). These accreditation rules describe how we are to sample properties during our certification assessments. These documents are available online at either ANAB or SCC’s websites ([www.anab.org,](http://www.anab.org/) www.scc.ca).

*ATFS program requirements*: This includes the internal monitoring requirements (required sample, optional reinpsections, and initial inspections), inspector training, inspector eligibility requirements and certification eligibility requirements for landowners and properties. More information is available on the ATFS website

at <https://www.treefarmsystem.org/documents-for-foresters>

*Conformance:* An instance or trend of landowners meeting the requirements of the Standards.

*Corrective Action Plan:* ATFS is asked to prepare a plan to respond to the findings from each assessment. This plan can have short and long term components. ATFS staff will develop following the draft findings report from the assessment team and review with state Tree Farm programs to ensure there are workable solutions to the issues raised by the assessors.

*Corrective action request*: The corrective action request is the official findings report from the assessment team.

*Findings*: The assessment team will compile their observations from the field and the state program documentation review into different findings that describe the trends of conformance or nonconformity.

*Nonconformity:* An instance or trend of landowners not meeting the requirements of the Standards.

*State assessment team*: The assessment team is comprised of the lead contact and field personnel from the state Tree Farm being assessed.

## Appendix 2: SAMPLE Opening Meeting Agenda

PwC Opening Meeting Agenda

[Location] January XX, 2019

   10 am - 4 pm

**Introductions (PwC/ATFS) (15 minutes)**

* Roles and Responsibilities
* Agenda Review

**Review of the Assessment Process (PwC) (30 minutes)**

* Confirm the Scope
	+ AFF 2015-2020 Standard
	+ Assessment population of ATFS Tree Farmers as of **January 1, 2019**; no changes to assessment population or other significant aspects
	+ Review assessment requirements, expectations and schedule
* Definition of Major and Minor Nonconformities, and Opportunities for Improvement
* Confirm other field assessment planning memo details

**Overview of the State Tree Farm Program (30 minutes)**

* Review stakeholder list
* Confirm state BMPs and/or applicable forestry legislation/regulations

**Field Assessment Planning Logistics (30 minutes)**

* Review the assessment process including key liaisons, procedures for obtaining information, contacting ATFS Tree Farmers and/or their representative, meetings and field visits
* Review the pre-planning form
* Finalize field visit schedule – Maintain PwC template
* Safety
* Timeline Review

**004 Assessment (1 hour)**

* Demonstration of internal monitoring program implementation
* Review the 2018 internal monitoring required sample was performed
* Review records of internal monitoring
* Review internal monitoring ATFS inspector training qualifications
* Review any previous years’ 004 Open findings and update their status (i.e.

OPEN/CLOSED)

**AFF Site Selection (PwC/ATFS) (2.5 hours)**

* Review available information for all sites in the state population (State Committee provide state map, available/known information of recent harvest activity, etc.)
* Select sample from the population based on
1. the ANAB sampling requirements and
2. geographical distribution across state/counties.
* Review logistics of accessing the sample sites and then substitute any sites that cannot fit logistically.

**Closing Remarks and Adjourn (30 minutes)**

**Materials for Meeting**

* Committee bylaws, handbook, operations manual, strategic plan and other governing documents;
* State copies of the previous year’s Required inspections (ATFS staff will have electronic copies including the Standards Checklist for each form);
* Samples of communications to Tree Farmers and Inspectors (newsletters, direct mail letters, e-news, etc.);
* List of external stakeholders’ names and their contact information. These stakeholders will be contacted by PwC for the public consultation requirements. Stakeholders include representatives of governmental agencies, community groups, forest industry and conservation organizations who are aware of and respond to questions about the program at the state level, but are not directly involved with its implementation or serve on the committee. (5 – 7 per state preferred, at least three per state required);
* Internet access;
* Projector;
* Map of the state with sufficient detail to locate Tree Farms identified for field visits.

Appendix 3: **PwC Pre-Planning Form**

**Confidential**

**2015 - 2020 AFF Standard ATFS Verification – Pre-Planning Information:** Please complete the information below to the best of your ability for each property selected for assessment. This information will allow PwC to more efficiently plan the site visit and focus on recent activities. Once completed, return a copy of this form and Tree Farm forest management related documents to your ATFS State Program Committee contact by the scheduled deadline. Thank-you.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **State** |  | **Tree Farmer Name**  |  |
|  |  | **Tree Farm Name**  |  |
|  |  | **Tree Farm Number**  |  |
|  |  | **Forested Acres**  |  |

**Advanced Planning (to be completed by Land Owner or their representative before the assessment:**

Please summarize the activities that have occurred in the last five years that address the elements below to help PwC focus their time at the Tree Farm.

**Brief summary of recent on-the-ground activities pertinent to ATFS**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Activity** | **When** | **Description** |
| Harvesting (thinning/select/clearcut) |  |  |
| Road Construction/Maintenance |  |  |
| Planting/Natural Regen |  |  |
| Chemical Use |  |  |
| Riparian Areas  |  |  |
| Use of Fire |  |  |
| Air, Water and Soil Protection Measures |  |  |
| Fish, Wildlife and Biodiversity (e.g. stream enhancements; Food Plots; other activities) |  |  |
| Forest Aesthetics |  |  |
| Special Sites |  |  |
| Forests of Recognized Importance (FORI) |  |  |
| Threatened or endangered species (state or federally listed) |  |  |
| Infraction(s), Citation(s), Warning(s) in regards to any applicable federal, state or local laws, including BMPs |  |  |
| Invasive species (integrated pest management) Pest/disease control (other than chemical) |  |  |
| Other forest health issues (insects, disease, wildfire, etc.) |  |  |

**Summary other programs on Tree Farm property**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Program** | **Yes/No** | **Description** |
| State Tax Abatement, Current Use, Tax Law Program |  |  |
| Cost Share Programs (EQIP, State, Other) |  |  |
| Conservation Easement |  |  |
| State Wildlife Management Area or Leased for Hunting |  |  |
| Other: |  |  |
| Other: |  |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Have consultants and/or contractors been used as part of the Management of this Tree Farm (forest consultants, loggers, pesticide applicators etc.)? If so, please complete the following table.  | Yes 🞎No 🞎 |
| **Management Activity** | **When** | **Consultant Name** | **Contact Information** |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

**Landowner and/or Landowner Representative Contact Information**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Is Land Owner Absentee? Y/N** | **Phone Number** |
| Landowner: |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| Landowner Rep: |  |  |
|  |  |  |

Optional Notes:

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |
|  |