

FSC® US FSS – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



General Questions

1. Why was the Standard revised?

a. The Standard was updated to align with the updated FSC International Principles & Criteria (Version 5) and International Generic Indicators (IGIs), and to address priority issues raised by stakeholders. All FSC Forest Stewardship Standards are required to go through regular revisions to stay in alignment with current global Standards set by FSC International and to reflect any changes that may have occurred within that country/region. The US FSS revision process, initiated in 2018 and culminating in 2025, involved extensive public consultations and iterative feedback with FSC International.

2. I heard the FSC International Principles and Criteria (P&C) are about to be revised. Will the US have to update this Standard again as soon as the new P&C are published?

a. No, we will stay on our normal revision schedule, which is typically a 5-year cycle. If this 5-year expectation remains the same within the FSC normative framework, we will begin the revision process to align this Standard to whichever P&C is current at that time.

3. Why is the revised Standard so much longer than the current version? Are there more requirements?

a. The main difference is that the revised Standard includes significantly more guidance than the previous version, at the request of stakeholders. The main body of the Standard (the Principles, Criteria, and Indicators) takes up less than 50% of the entire Standard - 92 of 238 pages - and includes substantial Indicator- and Criterion-specific guidance notes interspersed throughout. Most of the remaining pages are either part of the glossary or guidance annexes. However, there are more Criteria and Indicators applicable to all Management Units in the revised Standard, which is mostly due to the need to align with the FSC International Generic Indicators (IGIs).

4. What are the biggest changes in the revised Standard?

a. A breakdown of changes can be found in our resource list on our webpage, [here](#). Some more notable changes include: streamlined certification for non-timber forest products (NTFP), a requirement to have a dispute resolution process in place, a requirement to engage in FPIC (Free, Prior, and Informed Consent) processes with Indigenous Peoples when their rights might be impacted by management activities, increased adaptation of indicators for family forests, greater emphasis on worker rights and well-being, support for greater consistency in identification of high conservation values, a requirement to assess and consider the potential future impacts of climate change, an explicit threshold for a required extent of conservation areas, and changes intended to reduce barriers to certification of tribal lands. Additionally,

Principle 10 is now applicable to all management units, instead of being only management units containing FSC Plantations (as it was in the old standard).

5. Where can I find support tools and resources to help me with this transition?

a. This webpage includes a list of available tools and resources, as well as dates and links to webinars and upcoming meetings. It is regularly updated as we develop new support tools to help you. Currently available tools include: an indicator-level breakdown of changes from the old to revised Standard, a summary of the major changes, several one-pagers covering major issue areas (i.e. RSA, CAN, conversion, etc.), simplified breakdowns of the Standard at a Principle and Criteria level, and more.

Getting Audited to the New Standard

6. When should I expect auditors to move from looking for conformance with the old Standard to conformance with the revised Standard?

b. You must be in conformance with and have your first audit to the revised Standard before the end of the transition period (September 30, 2027). If you have only one audit during the transition period, the shift will occur with this one. Due to the length of the transition period, some certificate holders may have two audits within that period, in which case it's possible to choose to be audited to the old Standard for the first audit and then the revised standard for the second one. PLEASE NOTE: All major non-conformances will need to be closed prior to the end of the transition period for you to maintain your certification; therefore, we highly recommend that you do not wait until the very end of the transition period to have your first audit to the new standard.

7. Will I lose my certification if I miss something?

a. As with all audits, you will normally have a period of time to address any non-conformances that are assessed by your Certification Body. However, it is important to understand that all major non-conformances identified in an audit to the revised Standard must be closed before the end of the transition period. If they are not confirmed as closed by your Certification Body before the end of the transition period, your certification will be at risk. The current Standard expires at the end of the transition period, meaning if you are not found to be in conformance to the revised Standard by the end of the transition period, you are not in conformance with a valid Standard, and therefore cannot maintain FSC certification.

8. I am due for a surveillance audit in 2026, will I have to schedule a full recertification audit instead because I am being audited to a new Standard?

a. No, your audit cycle will not be disrupted by the introduction of the revised Standard. If a Certificate Holder is due for a surveillance audit, they will still have a surveillance audit, in which case the Certification Body will focus on what is required for a typical surveillance audit in addition to any items they may flag as particularly important changes from the current to the revised Standard. We are still working to confirm whether every changed or new indicator must be audited before the end of the transition period – this has not been required during previous transitions. However, regardless of what gets audited during the transition period, Certificate Holders must update their practices to be in conformance with the revised Standard before the end of the transition period – and your Certification Body may ask in a later audit to see evidence that this was achieved.

9. If it ends up that Certification Bodies don't have to audit all of the changed and new indicators before the end of the transition period, does that mean that I might have more time to make some of these changes?

a. No. Certificate Holders are required to be in conformance with the revised standard by the end of the transition period, regardless of what gets audited.

10. What happens if I'm not ready by the deadline?

- a. The current Standard expires at the end of the transition period. So, if you haven't had an audit to the revised standard and closed any major non-conformances that were assessed, your Certification Body will be unable to confirm that you are certified to the new standard. This means that you will not in conformance with a valid Standard at all (since the old Standard will no longer be valid), and therefore you will not be able to maintain your FSC certification.

Topics Addressed in the FSS

11. What is the Conservation Areas Network?

- a. The Conservation Areas Network (CAN) is a new concept in the revised Standard. Generally, the CAN is a set of areas within the certified area that are intended primarily to conserve environmental or cultural values (i.e., they are specifically designated for achieving objectives other than timber production). The CAN does not necessarily require additional conservation outcomes so much as it puts together a complete picture of conservation-oriented areas and is made up of various conservation zones/protection areas recognized and required by specific elements of the Standard. However, per Indicator 6.5.7, the CAN is to comprise at minimum 10% of the certified area. Therefore, it's possible there will be a need to establish additional conservation areas if the combination of all of your areas already designated for conservation efforts (RSAs, RMZs, HCVs, etc.) add up to less than 10%. Though it's a "network," the areas that make up the CAN do not need to be spatially connected.

12. If an area is protected as a Riparian Management Zone (RMZ), can it also be part of the Conservation Areas Network (CAN)?

- a. FSC has clarified that if an area adjacent to a waterway is managed ONLY to maintain water quality, then it cannot be considered part of the CAN. However, in the US context, RMZs typically protect multiple environmental values, not just water quality (e.g., riparian habitat, connectivity for wildlife movement). Because of this, RMZ's will almost always meet the definition of conservation areas: "areas that are designated and managed primarily to safeguard species, habitats, ecosystems, natural features or other site-specific values because of their natural environmental or cultural values, or for purposes of monitoring, evaluation or research, not necessarily excluding other management activities" and can therefore contribute to the CAN.

13. What are Representative Sample Areas?

- a. Representative Sample Areas are areas designated to protect or restore native ecosystems within the management unit, when these native ecosystems are not adequately represented and protected in the landscape that includes the management unit. More information on how to identify native ecosystems that should be considered, and guidance on determining what is "adequate" for protections within the landscape, see Annex G in the revised Standard.

14. I heard that the revised standard makes certifying NTFP's (Non-Timber Forest Products) much easier – do I just add them to the scope of my certificate?

- a. Non-timber forest products are now included in the scope of the FSS and there are no external normative documents that need to be considered besides the requirements of the revised Standard. Harvesting, management, and commercial sales of NTFPs are generally aligned with the requirements for timber products in the revised Standard. There are a very small number of new indicators that are only applicable to NTFP. You will need to work with your Certification Body to include any NTFP that you wish to sell as FSC-certified within the scope of your certificate and demonstrate that you are in conformance with applicable indicators prior to selling them with an FSC claim.