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“I believe that all producers, small or big, will have to certify to be competitive. Despite the additional demands and need to have full commitment from all involved, I am very proud to be certified. I believe this is a great tool to ensure that I am complying with my duty with society, by generating jobs and income, with the conservation of nature and having a satisfactory financial result.”

Marcio Teixeira Fernandes, a Suzano outgrower who became FSC certified through Suzano’s group certification programme

The project
In 2009, Suzano started an outgrowers certification programme to ensure good forest management from its partners. The programme was a success, but the cost of certifying a single property proved to be very high, especially for smallholders. So in 2011, the company set up a voluntary group certification programme to make the process easier and more financially feasible for small and medium-sized producers.

To join a group, a producer needs to be a member of Suzano’s outgrowers programme. Together, the group formally defines its objectives, rights and responsibilities, and appoints an administrator – who can be a member of the group or an outside professional. Legal documentation on property rights is verified, and environmental and social impacts are evaluated on a quarterly basis, along with labour and occupational health and safety standards.

Each member and their employees who participate in the FSC certification process receive training on complying with legal requirements and FSC criteria. Suzano also provides technical support to help the group develop a sustainable forest management plan and meet FSC certification standards. The administrator ensures that all members’ forest management is monitored periodically.

So far, there are six certification groups. Four groups have been certified, and auditors have recommended the other two groups for certification following their initial assessment. Within these groups are 75 landowners, covering more than 22,400 hectares of planted forests – 38 per cent of the total managed by outgrowers supplying Suzano’s Mucuri mill – and more than 13,000 hectares of natural Atlantic rainforest ecosystems.

Benefits
Forest certification has brought a number of social, environmental and economic benefits to the area. This can be seen particularly in occupational health and safety standards, with more than 200 landowners and workers receiving training to date. Improvements include safety procedures for using machinery and safe disposal of chemicals. Conditions for workers have also been improved, with food and drinking water quality closely monitored, and upgrades made to employees’ homes.

The certification process involves consultation with the community, and has opened up a communication channel between owners and communities. This is valuable in itself, and has also helped with identifying areas of High Conservation Value, which certified producers are required to protect.

While group certification is much more affordable than individual certification for smaller producers, there are a number of costs involved: Suzano pays a premium price for certified wood to cover these.

Next steps
Group certification has allowed many more small growers to realize the benefits of FSC certification than would have been possible on an individual basis. Suzano intends to keep promoting group certification of its outgrowers in Bahia, and hopes to expand the practice to its other units in other states.