

Keeping track of Guyana's logs

An ITTO activity examines the effectiveness of Guyana's log tracking system in the identification of illegally harvested timber

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IN GUYANA, encouraging verification of legality in forest operations has been a priority at the national level. As the demand for tropical timber grows, and at a time when increasing pressure is being placed on natural tropical forests, Guyana has positioned itself to take on the challenge of providing verification of the origin of all timber products harvested from its forests.

To this end, in 2000, Guyana instituted a national log tracking system as a means of providing verification of the origin of forest products and also, of equal importance, as a means of controlling illegal logging activities. The system is comprehensive and applies to all state forest operations in Guyana, as well as indigenous lands and private property. It provides verifiable evidence of the legitimacy, location and magnitude of forest operations whereby log tags are assigned to legal operators at the commencement of their annual operations. The implementation of this system was timely for the forest sector of Guyana, as international buyers are increasingly demanding certified timber products, or at the very least, legally verifiable timber products.

Following six years of generally successful operation of the log tracking system, the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC) identified the need for an audit in an effort to enhance the overall functioning of the system.

The objectives were threefold: 1) to perform an audit of the existing log tracking system; 2) to develop a database to record the current status of all log tags; and 3) to train forest users in the effective use of the log tracking system.

Enhancing log tracking

The activity 'Enhancing law compliance in the forest sector in Guyana through an audit of GFC's log tracking system' was submitted to ITTO by the GFC in 2006 for funding under the Organization's 2006–2007 Work Program. This Work Program activity calls on ITTO, upon request, to assist countries to develop systems to demonstrate the legality of timber exports. The GFC acted as implementing agency for the activity. The objectives were threefold: 1) to perform an audit of the existing log tracking system; 2) to develop a database to record the current status of all log tags; and 3) to train forest users in the effective use of the log tracking system.



Sourced: Tags like this are an important part of Guyana's chain of custody tracking system.

Photo: P. Bholanath

Main activities

In June 2006, ProForest, a UK-based consulting firm, was contracted by the GFC to audit the log tracking system that Guyana has in place for its timber products. Consistent with the European Union Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (EU-FLEGT) and the Global Forestry Trade Network (GFTN) requirements, the legal assurance systems for Guyana have taken into consideration the definition of legality and a mechanism to ensure that there is a secure chain of custody for timber products. The definition of legality for timber products was envisioned to encompass all laws and regulations that must be complied with in the production process in Guyana. Traceability was identified as an important element in the chain-of-custody system, which should adequately track timber from the forest where it is harvested through different owners and stages in processing, to the point of export.

A local IT consultancy firm and training consultant were contracted to develop the database to track log tags issued and utilized, and provide training in log tagging, respectively. Training in the use and documentation of the log tracking system was conducted by the GFC in collaboration with the Forest Products Marketing Council of Guyana, Inc (FPMC).

Audit procedure

In order to achieve the planned activities, including a definition of legality and adequate traceability, ProForest developed a checklist for a comprehensive assessment of the current timber legality system operating in Guyana covering all existing measures, documentation and current implementation in terms of the system's ability to indicate legality and traceability from the stump to the final consumer.

The assessment process included discussions with industry, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other key individuals with knowledge and experience in Guyana's forest sector. The assessment focused on identifying gaps in the existing documentation and current operational mechanisms, in relation to the ability to indicate legality and traceability, with particular attention given to requirements set out in internationally recognized schemes.

Results

The project activities revealed areas where corrective action is warranted, but also indicated that the GFC has successfully formulated a log tracking mechanism involving log identification tags and a documentation system. Although the basic elements of a tracking system are in place, the consultants identified inconsistencies in its current application. These included the determination and issuance of the Annual Allowable Cut (AAC) for the species utilized by concessionaires, and accompanying permits/tags, including reconciliation of the usage, identification and documentation of logs in transport, and control and identification of timber during processing.

Recommendations were made to address ways in which the system can be improved to correct these inconsistencies, and the GFC developed an action plan to address the identified inconsistencies at every stage of timber operations. This action plan is currently being implemented by the GFC. A database to track the issuance and usage of tags by concessions was developed by the IT consultant. This is already proving to be useful to allow reconciliation of tags issued and tags used by concessions in a timely manner.

Training was completed in eleven strategic locations across Guyana. The sessions were very successful and attendance was excellent. The delivery of the training was carried out by GFC's senior management team in collaboration with the FPMC. The interaction at these sessions was effective in illustrating the operation of the log tracking system and receiving feedback on further improvements.

Conclusions

This project has been very useful in identifying the key areas where the Guyana Forestry Commission needs to place increasing emphasis in the near future. The main lessons learned from the project are:

- an audit of the log tracking system needs to be carried out periodically to ensure that the system is working effectively;
- adequate reconciliation of tags issued and used is regularly required in order to track the updated status of tag usage;
- training needs to be carried out on a periodic basis on the use of the log tracking system;
- the documentation of logs tag usage needs to be more consistent and systematic to identify and track defaulters;
- there is a need for a widely accepted national definition of forest legality which can be used in the verification of legality in the chain of custody of timber products; and
- annual allowable cuts should be based on the level of species availability/utilization.



Ready for loading: Tagged logs in a concession in Guyana's Mabura region stacked prior to transport. *Photo: P. Bholanath*

It was found that the mechanisms necessary for a robust chain of custody are in place, but must be strengthened in order to ensure legal trade in all forest products. Guyana's forest sector is on the path of expansion and development and brings with it additional demands on the existing monitoring and regulatory mechanism of the GFC. The GFC has indicated every intention to embrace these challenges and to commit the necessary resources to bridge the gaps which were identified. Training in the use of the log tracking system is also of vital importance. This is especially necessary for the system to continue functioning smoothly despite staff turnover or shortage of resources at the forest operations level.

The database, developed as the third output of this project, is necessary to aid the matching of log tags with actual production. This was one of the areas that the auditors emphasized as being vital to aid effective monitoring of the log tracking system. Further, a clear definition of legality and increased monitoring of the use of log tags are imperative to ensure that the system continues to function effectively and provide the basis for ascertaining legal verification.

The GFC and the FPMC are currently building on the activities completed by this activity in establishing a legal verification system for timber products in Guyana (see PD 440/07 REV.1 (M,I), page 18). It is envisaged that this system will be used to provide verification of the legality of forest products originating from Guyana at the concession level. This system will greatly assist forest products exporters who are seeking to penetrate and retain international markets that seek legally verifiable products.