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A newsletter from the International Tropical Timber Organization to promote the conservation and sustainable development of tropical forests

Keeping track

Foresters and forest planners have always needed to know the location of timber resources, including for planning forest management and harvesting operations, for monitoring wood flows to mills and ports, and for marketing of forest products. Various systems have been developed over the years to provide this type of information. In the tropics, these have until recently been mostly based on complex paper-based forms that were often prone to error and/or corrupt practices, thereby reducing their utility and often compounding the problems they were meant to solve.

Over the past decade and a half there has been a boom in electronic and other sophisticated systems for

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ITTO

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Images: Log tracking in Guyana. *Photo: Guyana Forestry Commission* (cover); Log marking/tracking in Peru (above). *Photo: M. Torres*

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tracking logs and finished wood products. This began with the adaptation of the type of barcodes used for inventory control of packaged items in supermarkets to forestry applications (see article from Peru on the following pages of this issue) and has evolved to include radio frequency identification tags, sophisticated wireless communications technologies (see *Topical and tropical* this issue), remote sensing, stable isotope analysis, DNA profiling (see *Nature's barcode*, *TFU* 22-1) and other techniques.

The prime driver behind this explosion in forestry tracking technologies has been the growing demand for demonstrably legal and sustainable forest products (as laid out, for example, in the new EU Timber Regulation, the US Lacey Act and other importing market requirements). At the same time, forestry administrations in several tropical countries, including many producer member countries of ITTO, have recognized that weak governance and other problems have resulted in significant production and trade of illegally produced timber. This illegal production puts legitimate timber businesses at a competitive disadvantage and can also mean big losses of resource rents and other government revenues.

ITTO has been a strong supporter of timber tracking as a means of strengthening forest governance in the tropics and thereby promoting sustainable forest management. Numerous projects have been funded, through the regular project cycle and more recently through the TFLET (Tropical Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade) thematic program and the ITTO-CITES program. CITES, with substantial experience in tracking of animal species listed in its Appendices, was keenly interested in collaborating with ITTO to promote the adoption of timber-tracking technologies in tropical countries with CITES-listed tree species. This resulted in the 2012 joint publication *Tracking sustainability* (ITTO Technical Series 40), a review of currently available electronic and semi-electronic timber-tracking technologies.

Timber-tracking technologies are also playing an increasing role in independent forest and chain-of-custody certification, as indicated in the articles from Peru and Cameroon on the following pages of this issue. Cost issues are of course a major concern for many countries and this is part of the reason why there has been an upsurge in requests for assistance to ITTO and other partners like FAO to help to fund the acquisition and implementation of such technologies. It is important for countries to select appropriate technologies *vis-à-vis* the sophistication of their forest sectors, geographical considerations, available budgets, major markets and other relevant factors. It is also important to note that many of the evolving sophisticated (and more costly) technologies (eg stable isotope analysis, DNA profiling) are designed to support and work in tandem with existing tracking and forest management systems to focus on particular problem areas (or species) rather than being implemented on a country-wide scale.

In an ideal world, timber tracking would be once again solely the domain of foresters, who would return to using it primarily as a forest management and marketing tool rather than as proof of legality of production. However given the gaps in forest governance that still exist in many tropical countries and the desire of many consumers of wood products to be reassured that their purchases are not damaging the environment, it appears likely that these technologies will continue to play an important public role in managing forests better and in marketing products produced in them in a legal and sustainable manner. ITTO will continue to be at the forefront of promoting timber-tracking technologies in its producer member countries and informing the world of their implementation here in the *TFU*.

Steve Johnson
Editor