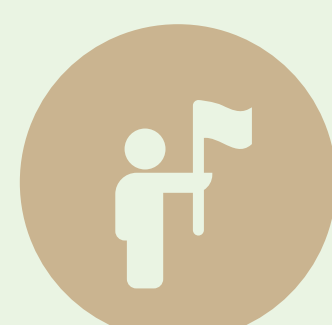




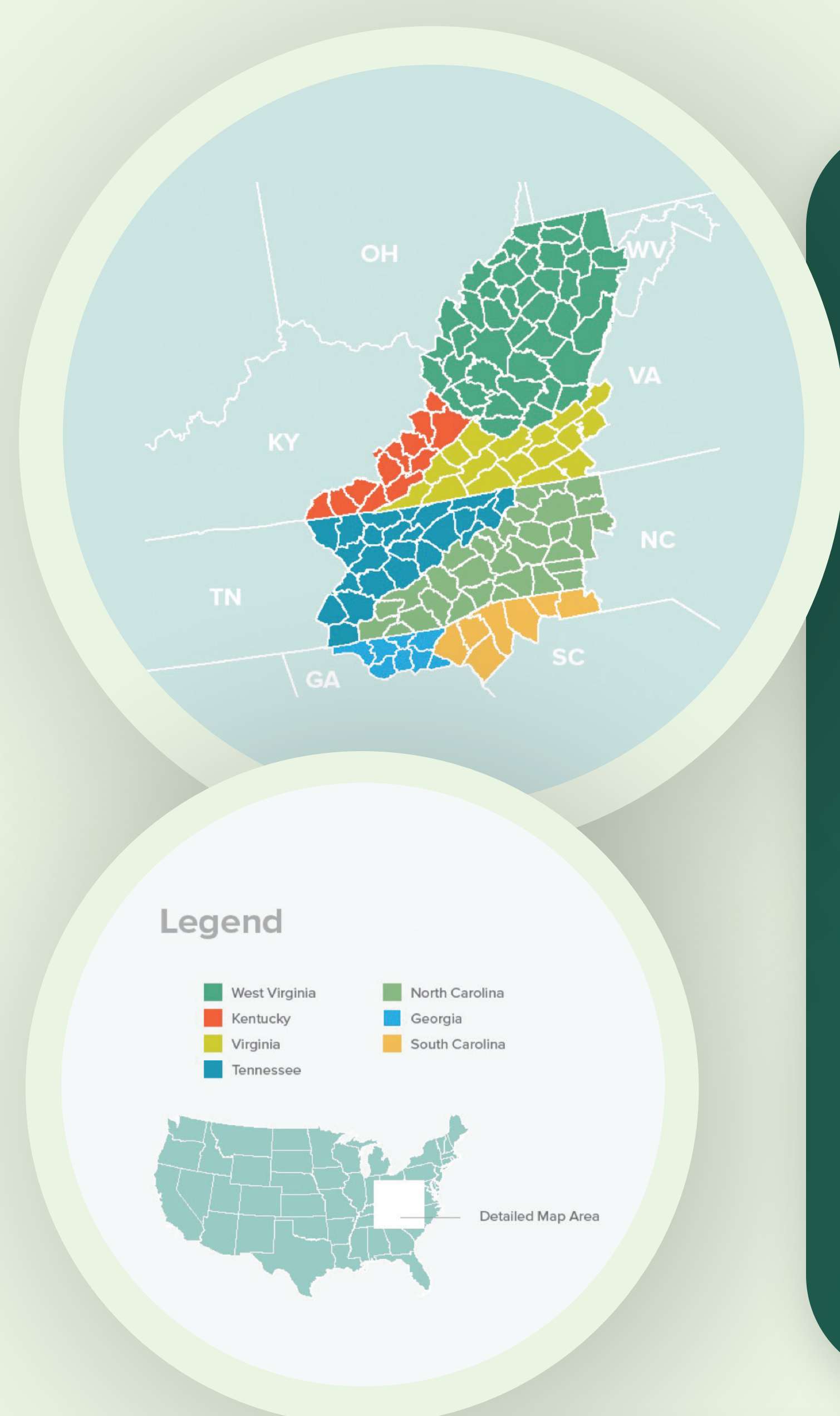
SMALLHOLDER ACCESS PROGRAM: A SUCCESSFUL PILOT TEST OF AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION FOR ENGAGING SMALLHOLDERS IN FSC FOREST MANAGEMENT CERTIFICATION



AUTHORS

AMY CLARK EAGLE (FSC US, DIRECTOR OF SCIENCE & CERTIFICATION), **ROSARIO GALÁN** (FSC IC, COMMUNITY AND FAMILY FORESTS MANAGER)

In 2017, Rainforest Alliance approached FSC International and FSC US with an innovative streamlined smallholder certification concept which was developed in partnership with FSC certificate holders and other stakeholders. The Smallholder Access Program (SAP) pilot was initiated in 2019 to evaluate the streamlined concept in South and Central Appalachia (United States). This region provided a perfect testing area with its biodiversity-rich forests, and low levels of risk for some elements of responsible forest management. The forests are predominantly managed by small private owners, who have traditionally rejected forest certification and rarely harvest more than once a generation with little forest management activity between harvests. However, when harvest occurs, it is typically done for the greatest possible financial return, leading to highly degraded forests that are not resilient to threats.



Main objectives

The objectives of the SAP pilot were to assess within the pilot region whether the streamlined concept:

- could achieve the same outcomes as regular certification,
- would be feasible and cost-effective for certificate holders, and
- resulted in any significant benefits or conflicts in the relevant market.

Innovative approach

The innovative aspects of the SAP framework focus on increased simplicity and reduced costs, while ensuring responsible forest management. The framework has four key elements that are customized to the region where implemented:

- Very small management units, in the pilot region less than 100 ha;
- A streamlined standard based on assessment of risk and stakeholder engagement. In this pilot, a 31-indicator standard, based on potential risk to social and environmental values.
- Short-term membership in an experienced FSC forest management group. In the pilot, 12-24 months membership, including harvest planning, harvest execution and at least 6-months post-harvest.
- Enhanced monitoring during group membership. In this pilot, at least 3 site-visits to each harvest site: pre-harvest, during harvest, and post-harvest. Cost reductions: For family forest owners, there was little to no cost for participation.

For group managers, savings were driven by reduced audit time, lower administrative costs, and streamlined expectations for responsible forest management. One group manager reported \$40,000 USD value added per five participating family forest owners. Forest management improvements:

- Increased on-the-ground time for group managers together with family forest owners.
- Engagement of experienced and reputable foresters and loggers.
- Harvests conducted under a plan.
- Consideration of long-term ecological impacts, not just short-term financial benefit.
- Assessment, consideration and protection of values beyond legal requirements.
- The pilot successfully concluded in June 2022 (20 family forests, 500 ha), with outcomes that demonstrate the SAP framework's applicability and potential, including:
 - post-harvest forests that are equivalent to traditional FSC group members and significantly improved over typical regional results (based on evaluations by 3rd party auditors and 3rd party experts);
 - a significant increase in group members from a size class previously inaccessible, and not cost-effective for groups;
 - an absence of major concerns from regional stakeholders;
 - forest owner commitments to long-term forest growth and maintenance of healthy and resilient stands, with no evidence of risk for harvested forest conversion to other uses;
 - forest owners better informed of alternatives for their forests, other than conversion or high-grading;
 - increased knowledge by the certificate holder of the forest trends in the region; and
 - market variability managed, by using the SAP framework as needed to adjust to the market.

Conclusions

The SAP pilot attracted forest owners previously uninterested in forest certification, introduced them to responsible forest management, and helped them realize how, with the right framework, they could have a positive impact on the forests they value. The SAP pilot helped certificate holders meet demand for FSC certified materials in a region where supply is restricted by limited certification of the family forest owners that dominate forest ownership. One participating certificate holder doubled the certified outputs from their forest management group.

The SAP framework has great global potential. However, before making it available more broadly, testing in other contexts is recommended. This additional data would help establish sideboards and safeguards for guiding customization of the SAP framework aligned with the risk profile and characteristics of a region, and for clarifying where it will likely be successful. This promising framework represents a potential solution for the challenges that family forests must overcome to implement responsible forest management. The SAP framework can help family forests contribute to global solutions for combatting climate change and generating other environmental and societal benefits.

