



VIETNAM FOREST CERTIFICATION SCHEME
VFCS/PEFC ST 1004:2026

QUẢN LÝ RỪNG THEO NHÓM – CÁC YÊU CẦU
Group forest management – requirements

Translated version

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Introduction

In Vietnam, more than 40% of plantation forest areas and most Trees outside Forests (TOF) are managed by individual forest owners and households. Limitations in financial resources and access to technical advances in forest and TOF management and business are major barriers to meeting market requirements for sustainable forest management, which is one of the key conditions in forest product trade.

Group forest management certification is an alternative approach to individual certification, allowing small-scale forest owners and TOF managers to voluntarily participate in a group and become certified under one group forest certificate in accordance with sustainable forest management standards. This approach helps reduce certification costs and improves information dissemination and cooperation in forest management among small-scale forest owners and TOF managers. The limitations concerning individual certification and the resulting procedures for group certification do not lead to a lower level of compliance with VFCS and PEFC requirements for sustainable forest management.

This standard is developed based on the VFCS/PEFC ST 1004: 2019 - Group Forest Management Standard to update sustainable forest management requirements in the current context.

This standard specifies requirements for group forest management certification under the Vietnam Forest Certification Scheme (VFCS/PEFC) and replaces VFCS/PEFC ST 1004: 2019.

1 Scope

This standard specifies requirements for group forest management certification against sustainable forest management standards applied in the Vietnam Forest Certification Scheme (VFCS/PEFC).

Requirements for the group forest management applied for group entity and participants. The group entity represents the participants for the purposes of group management and ensuring conformity with sustainable forest management standards and other applicable requirements under the VFCS.

2 Normative references

The following referenced documents are indispensable for the application of this standard. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition (including any amendments) applies.

TCVN 14596:2025 – Sustainable forest management – Requirements.

VFCS/PEFC ST 1003 2019 - Sustainable forest management standard

PEFC ST 1002:2018 – Group Forest Management - Requirements.

IAF MD 1, Mandatory Document for the Certification of Multiple Sites Based on Sampling.

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this standard, the following terms and definitions apply:

3.1 Affected stakeholder (*Bên liên quan bị ảnh hưởng*)

A stakeholder who might experience a direct change in living and/or working conditions caused by activities of the group organisation.

Note 1: Affected stakeholders include neighboring communities, indigenous people, workers, etc. However, having an interest in the subject matter of the standard (e.g. NGOs, the scientific community, civil society) is not equal to being affected.

Note 2: A stakeholder who might be a user of the standard is likely to become a certified entity, e.g. a forest owner in the case of a forest management standard, or a wood processing enterprise in the case of a chain of custody standard.

3.2 Forest owner (*chủ rừng*)

Organizations, households, individuals and local communities that are allocated or leased forests by the Government; land allocation or lease of land for afforestation; self-restoration and development of forests; receiving the transfer, donation or inheritance of forests in accordance with law; organizations and individuals have lawful rights to forest management and business.

Note 1: Forest owners include:

- a) Special-use forest management boards and protection forest management boards;
- b) Economic organizations, including enterprises, cooperatives, unions of cooperatives and other economic organizations established and operating in accordance with the law;
- c) Units of the people's armed forces that are allocated forests;
- d) Organizations engaged in forestry-related science and technology, vocational training and education;
- dd) Domestic households and individuals;
- e) Residential local communities;
- g) Foreign-invested enterprises that are leased land by the State for planting production forests;
- h) Other organizations and individuals having lawful land use rights and forest use rights.

3.3 Manager of trees outside forest (*chủ quản lý cây ngoài rừng*)

Organizations and individuals have the lawful right to use land for planting and managing trees outside forests.

Note 1: Trees outside forests are refers to Woody trees that grow naturally or be planted on land outside the forestry planning, including: forestry trees; perennial industrial crops; perennial fruit trees; perennial multi-purpose trees; crops are scattered on land in home gardens, traffic corridors, riversides, canals, ditches, regional banks, plot banks, rice fields, and combined agriculture and forestry.

3.4 Group entity

A legal entity established in accordance with the law, representing forest owners who are individuals and households in group forest management, and having overall responsibility for ensuring conformity of forest management with sustainable forest management requirements.

Note 1: The group entity may include the following authorities or organizations: forest owners or Trees outside Forests managers that are organizations; enterprises; professional social organizations; cooperative alliances, cooperative unions and cooperatives; management authorities; and other organizations recognized under the law.

3.5 Group forest certificate (*chứng chỉ quản lý rừng theo nhóm*)

A document confirming that the group organization complies with the requirements of a sustainable forest management and other applicable requirements under the VFCS.

3.6 Group forest certification (*chứng nhận quản lý rừng theo nhóm*)

Certification of the group organization under one group forest certificate that complies with the requirements of the sustainable forest management standard and group forest management requirements applied within VFCS.

3.7 Certified area (*diện tích được chứng nhận*)

Forest area and Trees outside Forests covered by a sustainable forest management system according to the standard applied within VFCS.

For group forest management, the certified forest area and Trees outside Forests are the sum of the forest areas and Trees outside Forests of the participants covered by a group forest certificate.

3.8 Audit (*đánh giá chứng nhận*)

Systematic, independent and documented process for obtaining records, statements of fact or other relevant information and assessing them objectively and impartially to determine the extent to which specified requirements are fulfilled.

3.9 Internal audit (*đánh giá nội bộ*)

Systematic, independent and documented process for obtaining records, statements of fact or other relevant information and assessing them objectively and impartially, in order to determine the extent to which specified requirements are fulfilled, undertaken by the group organization itself (first party audit).

3.10 Monitoring (*giám sát*)

Determining of the status of a system, a process or an activity.

3.11 Group management system (*hệ thống quản lý nhóm*)

Set of interrelated or interacting elements of an organization to achieve the objectives and out comes of the sustainable forest management standard.

3.12. Group management plan (*kế hoạch quản lý nhóm*)

Documented information specifying objectives, actions and control arrangements. It covers planned changes of the group management system and requirements of the sustainable forest management standard which are covered at a group level.

3.13 Documented information (*thông tin dạng văn bản*)

Information required to be controlled and maintained by an organization, using any format and media, from any source.

3.14 Document confirming participation in group forest certification (*tài liệu xác nhận tham gia chứng nhận rừng theo nhóm*)

A document issued to a participant that refers to the group forest certificate and that confirms the participant as being covered by the scope of the group forest certification.

Note: This document may be for instance a sub-certificate or a confirmation of participation in the group certificate.

3.15 Group organization (*tổ chức nhóm*)

A group of participants represented by the group entity. The group organization is responsible for carrying out activities related to forest management as specified in the sustainable forest management standard applied within the VFCS. The operational arrangements, functions and responsibilities of participants and the group entity shall be defined through a binding written agreement.

The term “group organization” is equivalent to the term “regional organization” when it is expanded based on administrative boundaries or other provisions specified within VFCS, and shall comply with the contents set out in this definition.

3.16 Organization (*tổ chức*)

A person or group of people that has its own functions with responsibilities, authorities and relationships to achieve its objectives.

3.17 Participants (*thành viên nhóm*)

A forest owner or a Trees outside Forests manager listed in the group forest certificate, who has legal rights to manage forest and Trees outside Forests within a certified area and has sufficient capacity to implement the requirements of the sustainable forest management standard applied within VFCS.

Note 1: Regarding the requirement of having sufficient capacity to implement the requirements of the sustainable forest management standard applied within VFCS, forest owners and Trees outside Forests managers shall have legal management rights, usufruct rights or customary rights to manage forest and Trees outside Forests, and shall not include one-off contractors, or organizations or individuals carrying out forest or Trees outside Forests management on a temporary basis within the group forest certification.

3.18 Policy

Intentions and direction of an organization formally expressed by its manager/owner or the group entity.

4 General requirements

4.1 Group organization

4.1.1 The group organization shall include a group entity and participants. The group entity shall have legal status in accordance with the laws of Vietnam.

4.1.2 The group organization shall consider internal and external issues that may affect the establishment and operation of the group management system. The organizational structure of the group organization shall be determined based on at least one of the following factors:

- a) Regional grouping: a group of forest owners and Trees outside Forests managers defined by the boundaries of a specific area;
- b) Other grouping arrangements;
- c) Specific circumstances which may affect the implementation of the group management system (based on the practical implementation of the group organization).

NOTE 1: Internal factors include, but are not limited to, the following: group size and number of participants; geographical distribution of forest areas; capacity of the group entity and participants; technical and financial resources; experience and forest management techniques; existing documentation and information systems; internal management and control mechanisms.

NOTE 2: External factors include, but are not limited to, the following: relevant legal requirements; natural and environmental conditions; local socio-economic conditions; relationships with communities and stakeholders; land-related risks; market conditions.

4.2 Determining the needs and expectations of affected stakeholders

4.2.1 The group organisation shall determine the needs and expectations of affected stakeholders based on the following aspects:

- a) Affected stakeholders that are relevant for the group management system;
- b) Expectations of affected stakeholders;
- c) Relevant information relating to the needs and expectations of affected stakeholders shall be maintained as documented information.

4.3 Determining the scope of the group management system

4.3.1 The group organisation shall determine the scope of the group management system. The determination shall be based on the terms and definitions provided in Clause 3, including the group organisation, group entity, participants, certified area, group forest certificate, and the document confirming participation in group forest certification.

4.3.2 The group organisation shall establish the applicability, scope, and boundaries of the group management system.

4.3.3 The group organization shall apply and comply with the sustainable forest management standard applied within VFCS.

4.3.4 The scope of the group management system shall be available as documented information and shall be updated when there are changes in participants, certified area or the group organisation.

4.4 Group management system

4.4.1 All participants shall be subject to internal monitoring and internal audit.

4.4.2 Where the group entity acts as a trader of forest-based products not covered by the group certificate, it shall hold a PEFC Chain of Custody (CoC) certification.

5 Specific requirements

5.1 Functions and responsibilities of the group entity

5.1.1 The **group entity** shall establish, implement and maintain an effective management system for the group participants, and shall be specified:

- a) Documented procedures for the management of the group organization;
- b) Documented procedures and guidance for the preparation of documentation for the admission of new participants to the group organization. The admission procedures shall, as a minimum, include the verification of the applicant's information, such as contact details, forest and forest land documentation, the size of the area, and field verification;
- c) Documented procedures for the suspension and exclusion of participants who do not comply with the requirements of the group organization and do not take implement corrective actions to close nonconformities. Participants excluded from any certification group due to nonconformities shall not be admitted for membership within 12 months from the date of exclusion.

5.1.2 The **group entity** shall develop a Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) plan for the group and make a summary publicly available; implement and monitor the implementation of the SFM plan.

5.1.3 The **group entity** shall provide training and guidance to group participants and workers on matters related to forest management in accordance with the sustainable forest management standard applied under VFCS.

5.1.4 The **group entity** shall represent the group organization in the sustainable forest management certification process, including communication and relationships with the certification body (CB), submission of certification applications, and the selection and contractual engagement with the CB.

5.1.5 The **group entity** shall maintain documented information, including:

- a) The conformity of the group entity and participants with the requirements of the sustainable forest management standard and other applicable requirements under VFCS;
- b) Records of all participants, including contact details, area size, geographical coordinates, and their forest and forest land documentation;
- c) Records of the certified area;
- d) Records related to the implementation of the internal monitoring programme, its review, and any preventive and/or corrective actions taken.

5.1.6 The **group entity** shall establish relationships with all participants based on a binding written agreement, which shall include the participants' commitment to comply with the sustainable forest management standard applied under the VFCS. The group entity shall have a written contract or other written agreement with all participants, including the right of the group entity to implement and enforce any corrective or preventive measures, and to initiate the exclusion of any participant from the scope of certification in the event of nonconformity with the sustainable forest management standard and other applicable requirements under VFCS.

NOTE: The requirements for participants' commitment and for a written contract or other written agreement with participants may be satisfied by the commitment and written agreement of a pre-existing organisation or by the participation of members in an existing group (e.g. a forest owners'/managers' association), provided that such organisation can demonstrate that it has the legal authority to represent the participants and that the commitments, as well as the terms and conditions of the contract, are enforceable.

5.1.7 The **group entity** shall provide all participants with a document confirming their participation in group forest certification.

5.1.8 The **group entity** shall provide all participants with information and guidance required for the effective implementation and maintenance of compliance with the sustainable forest management standard and other applicable requirements under VFCS.

5.1.9 The **group entity** shall address nonconformities identified in accordance with VFCS and PEFC requirements, when reported by participants, and to ensure conformity across all participants.

5.1.10 The **group entity** shall operate an internal monitoring programme for the evaluation of participants' conformity with the certification requirements.

5.1.11 The **group entity** shall operate an annual internal audit programme covering both participants and the group entity.

5.1.12 The **group entity** shall conduct a management review of the group forest certification and take actions based on the results of that review.

5.1.13 The **group entity** shall provide full co-operation and assistance in responding effectively to all requests from the certification body (CB), accreditation body (AB), or the Vietnam Forest Certification Office (VFCO) for relevant data, documentation, or other information; and to allow access to the forest area managed by the group organization and to other relevant sites, facilities, and means, whether in connection with formal audits or reviews, or other related activities or those having implications for the management system.

5.2 Functions and responsibilities of participants

5.2.1 The **participants** shall provide a binding written commitment, including commitment on conformity with the sustainable forest management standard and other applicable requirements under VFCS; group participants excluded from any certification group can not apply for group membership within 12 months after exclusion.

NOTE: The requirement for "written agreement" and participants' "commitment" is also satisfied by the commitment of and written agreement of a pre-existing organisation or group or the members participation, such as a forest owners's/managers' association, where the organisation can demonstrate that it has a legal mandate to represent the participants and where its commitment and the terms and conditions of the contract are enforceable.

5.2.2 The **participants** shall provide the group entity with information about previous group participation.

5.2.3 The **participants** shall comply with the requirements of the sustainable forest management standard and other applicable requirements under VFCS.

5.2.4 The **participants** shall provide full co-operation and assistance in responding effectively to all requests from the group entity or the certification body (CB) for relevant data, documentation, or other information; allowing access to the forest area and to other relevant sites, facilities, and means, whether in connection with formal audits or reviews, or other related activities or those having implications for the management system.

5.2.5 The **participants** shall notify the group entity about nonconformities identified under other VFCS certifications than the particular group certification.

5.2.6 The **participants** shall implement relevant corrective and preventive actions established by the group entity.

5.3 Commitments and policy

5.3.1 The group entity shall establish the following commitments and policy:

- a) To comply with sustainable forest management standard and other applicable VFCS requirements;
- b) To integrate the group forest certification requirements in the group management system;
- c) To continually improve the group management system;
- d) To continuously support the improvement of the sustainable management of the land/forests by the participants.

5.3.2 The commitment of the group entity may be part of the group management policy and shall be made publicly available as documented information upon request.

5.3.3 The participants shall provide following commitments:

- a) To follow the rules of the management system;
- b) To implement the requirements of the sustainable forest management standard in their operation in their area.

5.4 Planning

5.4.1 If a group organisation plans any changes in the group management system, these changes shall be included in a group management plan.

5.4.2 If a group organisation decides to fulfil requirements of the sustainable forest management standard on the group level, these requirements shall be considered in a group management plan.

5.5 Support

5.5.1 Resources needed for the establishment, implementation, maintenance and continual improvement of the group management system shall be determined and provided.

5.5.2 Group organization shall determine the necessary competence of personnel working within the group management system.

5.5.3 Communication processes activities shall be implement to raise awareness among participants regarding:

- a) Group management policy;
- b) The requirements of the sustainable forest management standard;
- c) Their contribution to the effectiveness of the group management system and the sustainable forest management, including the benefits of improved group performance;
- d) The implications of not conforming with the group management system requirements.

5.5.4 The internal and external communications relevant to the group management system shall be determined, this includes:

- a) on what to communicate;

- b) when to communicate;
- c) with whom to communicate;
- d) how to communicate.

5.5.5 Shall establish appropriate mechanisms to resolve complaints and disputes related to group management and sustainable forest management operation.

5.5.6 Documented information relevant to the group management system and the conformance with the requirements of the sustainable forest management standard shall:

- a) Be updated;
- b) Be available and suitable for use, where and when it is needed;
- c) Be adequately protected against loss of confidentiality, improper use, or loss of integrity.

5.6 Group operation management

5.6.1 The **group organization** shall plan, implement and control the processes needed:

- a) To meet the requirements of the group certification standard and the sustainable forest management standard;
- b) To implement identified/planned activities (see **5.4**)

5.6.2 Planning, implementing and controlling shall be done by:

- a) Defining the necessary processes and establishing criteria for those;
- b) Implementing control of the processes in accordance with the criteria;
- c) Keeping documented information to the extent necessary to have confidence that the processes have been carried out as planned.

5.7 Monitoring and auditing

5.7.1 The group entity shall operate an internal monitoring programme and provide objective evidence of the conformity of the group organization with the sustainable forest management standard. In particular, this shall be determined through the following requirements:

- a) What shall be monitored and measured;
- b) The methods for monitoring, measurement, analysis and evaluation, as applicable, to ensure valid results;
- c) When the monitoring and measuring shall be performed;
- d) When the results from monitoring and measurement shall be analysed and evaluated;
- e) What documented information shall be available as evidence of the results;
- f) The monitoring frequency shall be determined in accordance with the risk level of the participants and the results of previous evaluations.

5.7.2 The group entity shall evaluate the group management performance and the effectiveness of the group management system concerning the implementation of the sustainable forest management requirements.

5.8 Internal audit

5.8.1 Group entity shall implement annual internal audit programme and provide information on whether the group management system:

5.8.1.1 Conform to:

- a) The group organisation's own requirements for its group management system;
- b) Requirements of VFCS/PEFC ST 1004.

5.8.1.2 Ensures the implementation of and conformity with the sustainable forest management standard on the participant level.

5.8.1.3 The internal audit shall be effectively implemented and maintained.

5.8.2 The internal audit programme shall cover the group entity and all group participants. The group entity shall be audited annually. The participants may be selected on a sample basis.

5.8.3 The internal audit programme shall cover at least following activities:

- a) Planning, establishing, implementing and maintaining an audit programme(s) including the frequency, methods, responsibilities, planning requirements and reporting, which shall take into consideration the importance of the processes concerned and the results of previous audits;
- b) Defining the audit criteria and scope for each audit;
- c) Determining the competence of internal auditors (forest knowledge, standard knowledge);
- d) Selection of auditors and conducting of audits to ensure objectivity and the impartiality of the audit process;
- e) Ensuring that the results of the audit are reported to relevant group management;
- f) Retaining of the documented information as evidence of the implementation of the audit programme and audit results.

5.8.4 Selection of participants in the internal audit programme

5.8.4.1 The group organization shall establish procedures for selecting participants for internal audit, including:

5.8.4.1.1 Determination of the sample size/number of participants (see **5.8.5**).

5.8.4.1.2 Determination of the sample categories (see **5.8.6**);

5.8.4.1.3 Distribution of the sample to the categories (see **5.8.7**);

5.8.4.1.4 Selection of participants (see **5.8.8**).

5.8.4.2 In the case of participation of pre-existing organizations or groups, or groups with multi-level membership structures (e.g. forest owners' associations and their members, cooperatives and their members), the sampling shall:

- a) Be carried out at both the intermediate organization level and the participant level;
- b) Be determined and distributed based on risk analysis, taking into account the complexity of the structure, geographical distribution and results of previous evaluations;
- c) The sample size shall be increased in cases where systemic nonconformities are identified or where the internal control system of the intermediate organization has not demonstrated its effectiveness;
- d) Documented information shall be established as evidence of the sampling methodology and sampling decisions.

5.8.5 The sample size shall be determined by:

5.8.5.1 Number of participants in group forest management.

5.8.5.2 The size of the sample generally should be the square root of the number of participants: ($y=\sqrt{x}$), rounded to the upper whole number.

5.8.5.3 The size of the sample may be adapted by a standard taking into account one or more of the following indicators:

- a) In the case where risk assessment results are available, deviations of sample sizes in case of low or high risk for individual categories shall be defined;
- b) Results of internal audits or previous certification audits;
- c) Quality / level of confidence of the internal monitoring programme;
- d) Use of technology allowing the gathering of information concerning specific requirement;

NOTE: Such technologies may be e.g. the use of satellite data or drones and allow compliance statements for specific requirements of a sustainability standard or support the risk based sampling.

e) Based on other means of gathering information about activities on the ground.

NOTE: Other means may include surveys with participants who provide some information about their activities on the ground.

5.8.6 The sample categories shall be determined by:

5.8.6.1 The results of the risk assessment and the indicators used for the risk assessment. The following indicators may be used for risk assessment:

- a) Ownership type (e.g. state-managed forests, community-managed forests, household or individual forests);
- b) Size of management units (divided into different area groups);
- c) Biogeographical region (e.g. lowland areas, low mountain areas, high mountain areas);
- d) Operation, processes and products of potential participants;
- e) Deforestation and forest land-use conversion;
- f) Business cycle;
- g) Level of biodiversity;
- h) Recreational functions and other socio-economic functions of forests;
- i) Dependence and interaction between communities and local people;
- j) Available resources for governance, administration, training and research activities;
- k) Governance and law enforcement;
- l) Proximity to protected areas or areas with high risk of deforestation.

5.8.6.2 Conditions which constitute risk for each indicator on low, medium and high level and the respective consequences for the sampling shall be defined.

5.8.7 The sample shall be distributed to the categories according to the result of the risk assessment.

5.8.8 The participant selection shall ensure:

5.8.8.1 At least 25% of the sample should be selected at random.

5.8.8.2 A risk-based procedure for the selection of participants shall be specified.

5.9 Management review

5.9.1 Leader of group organization shall conduct management review annually and shall at least include:

5.9.1.1 The status of actions from previous management reviews.

5.9.1.2 Changes in external and internal issues that are relevant to the group management system.

5.9.1.3 The status of conformity with the sustainable forest management standard, that includes reviewing the results of the internal monitoring programme, the internal audit and the certification body's evaluations and surveillance.

5.9.1.4 Information on the group performance, including trends in:

- a) Nonconformities and corrective actions;
- b) Monitoring and measurement results;
- c) Audit results.

5.9.1.5 Opportunities for continual improvement of the group management system.

5.9.2 The outputs of management review shall include decisions related to opportunities for continual improvement and any need for changes to the group management system.

5.9.3 The group organization shall retain documented information as evidence of the results of management review.

5.10. Improvement

5.10.1 When nonconformities in forest management occurs, the **group organization** shall:

5.10.1.1 Take corrective actions to correct nonconformities, for example:

- a) actions to control and correct the nonconformities;
- b) deal with the consequences.

5.10.1.2 Evaluate the need to take action to eliminate the causes of nonconformities, in order to ensure that they do not recur or occur elsewhere, by:

- a) Reviewing the nonconformities;
- b) Determining the causes of the nonconformities;
- c) Determining whether similar nonconformities exist or could potentially occur.

5.10.1.3 Implement any action needed.

5.10.1.4 Review the effectiveness of any corrective actions taken. The review shall be conducted within a timeframe appropriate to the nature and severity of the nonconformity.

5.10.1.5 Make changes to the group management system, if necessary.

5.10.2 Retain documented information as evidence of:

- a) The nature of the nonconformities and any subsequent actions taken;
- b) The results of any corrective actions.

5.10.3 A participant excluded from the group certification shall be internally audited by the group entity before being allowed to re-enter the group certification. The internal audit shall not take place sooner than 12 months after the exclusion.

5.10.4 The suitability, adequacy and effectiveness of the continual improvement of the group management system shall ensure the implementation of sustainable forest management.

References

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