



Complaint to the Forest Stewardship Council and Bureau Veritas Regarding Certification of the State of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources under FSC-US Forest Management Standard v1.1

April 2, 2026

We are Chandra Rosenthal, Attorney for Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) and Sean Hilzendeger, Law Clerk for PEER. PEER is a nonprofit organization that protects the rights of public employees and elevates their voices on important environmental issues.

We submit this formal complaint to the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Bureau Veritas (BV) challenging the certification of the State of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for “responsible forest management.” We have not previously raised the issues outlined below with DNR, but we agree that the complaint can be shared with DNR.

The FSC/BV certification of Minnesota DNR was issued without adequate audit, transparency, or consideration of significant legal, environmental, and stakeholder concerns. We urge FSC and BV to suspend certification until these issues are fully investigated and resolved.

I. Improper Issuance of Certification Prior to Audit Completion

It was improper for BV to issue the certificate, NO. US021864/1, before the audit began. Specifically, BV issued the most recent certificate on October 29, 2025, prior to completing the field audit on December 5, 2025, and before releasing the final audit report on January 6, 2026. This sequence raises concerns about the integrity of the certification process, suggesting that it was a mere formality rather than a rigorous review.

The final audit report was not shared with members of the public until March 2026. The final audit report has yet to be posted on the DNR website with the 2020-2024 Audit Reports. The lack of transparency and premature certification undermines public trust and violates FSC’s Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship. Issuing certification without transparency violates FSC Principle 8: Monitoring and Assessment, which requires public availability of monitoring results.

II. Failure to Address USFWS Federal Grant Withholdings (2023-2025)

The BV audit failed to adequately address DNR’s noncompliance with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (FWS) requirements under the Pittman Robertson Act as required under FSC Principle 1: Compliance with Laws. The 2023 FSC Report acknowledged DNR’s noncompliance due to overharvesting in Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) but accepted DNR’s proposed solutions without any meaningful follow-up. (See Finding No. 2023.1)

The 2024 and 2025 reports were silent on this issue, despite FWS withholding \$22 million from Minnesota due to these violations. FWS explicitly banned timber sales on State WMAs and Aquatic Management Areas until compliance is achieved.

We want to stress the significance of federal violations. In a letter dated August 7, 2023, FWS Regional Director Charles Traxler informed DNR Commissioner Sarah Strommen that “the DNR has acknowledged that it sold logging permits without providing the necessary” documentation showing that these sales were consistent with federal laws, including the Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act. In the letter, Traxler indicated that the state agreed that it “will not offer timber for sale on any State Wildlife Management Areas and Aquatic Management Areas.” Meanwhile, FWS will withhold FY2023-2025 wildlife habitat restoration funding until “all grant compliance and documentation issues are agreed to...”

These violations have led to faltering public faith in the DNR’s management and within the agency. FSC and BV’s lack of due diligence on this matter further erodes public trust.

III. Failure to Consider the 2025 Federal Office of Inspector General Investigation

In July 2025, the Department of Interior, Office of Inspector General (OIG) released an audit from its investigation.¹ The audit confirms what conservation advocates and DNR employees have long alleged: logging activities conducted by the DNR contradicted the conservation purposes of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR) Program.

Key findings include:

- “FWS was concerned that the Department’s timber harvest activities in the Minnesota WMAs may not have aligned with WSFR Program purposes.”
- “Timber harvest practices conducted under grants also seemed to be lacking wildlife conservation and management objectives or appropriate procedures and accepted principles of wildlife conservation and management.”
- “FAW staff [DNR’s Fish and Wildlife Division] indicated that they felt they did not have the ability to deny harvests on WMAs and felt pressure to meet cordage targets, regardless of the impact to wildlife habitat.”

The OIG ratified the FWS’s decision to withhold funds from the DNR and highlighted ongoing compliance concerns. It found that, “FWS has valid concerns regarding potentially competing priorities within the Department and the ability to ensure timber harvest activities on lands with a federal nexus maintain wildlife conservation and management objectives.”

These findings were available to BV prior to certification but were not referenced or investigated, in violation of FSC Principle 1: Compliance with Laws.

IV. Failure to Consider the 2025 Minnesota Office of Legislative Auditor Report

The Minnesota Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) published a report in October 2025, prior to BV’s audit, documenting DNR’s ongoing noncompliance with both state law and the Pittman Robertson Act. ²

The OLA found:

- “DNR’s procedures and guidelines do not provide clear direction to staff on how to prioritize the statutory purpose of WMAs [Wildlife Management Areas] when making decisions about harvesting timber in WMAs.”
- DNR’s lack of planning and documentation makes it difficult to assess its timber harvesting programs and to verify compliance with state and federal laws.

FSC Principle 1: Compliance with Laws, directs the certified organization to comply with all applicable laws. The OLA Report has placed FSC and BV on notice to follow up with DNR’s compliance with both state and federal requirements for wildlife management areas, yet this was not done.

V. Failure to Consider Employee Concerns with Forestry Management, Overharvesting and Wildlife Management Area Protection

The 2025 FSC report inadequately addressed widespread employee dissatisfaction at DNR regarding forestry management, overharvesting, and WMA protection. Employee Surveys, conducted by PEER³, internally by DNR, and by the OLA, highlight staff concerns, conflicting directives, and retaliation by employees who raised compliance issues. These concerns were not meaningfully considered in the certification process as required in Principle 2: Workers’ Rights and Employment Conditions.

VI. Failure to Consider Complaints Raised with Certifying Bodies

The issues raised in this complaint were provided to BV, FSC, and Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) investigators on December 4, 2025, during the week of the field audit. The concerns were ultimately dismissed by the Bureau Veritas Forestry Technical Manager - North & Central America, on March 2, 2026, in an email.

“After many communications with the 2025 audit team about your concern; an examination of the team’s extensive field work assessing the certificate holder, including a technical review of all aspects of their audit by our FSC Forest Management accreditation manager;

and the audit team's recommendation for continuing certification of the State of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources FSC FM certificate, we have deferred further investigation into your complaint until the 2026 Certificate Renewal audit.”

The response to defer further investigation until the 2026 certificate renewal audit is an inadequate response given the seriousness of the issues raised.

VII. Request for Relief

Given the significant unresolved issues, we request that Minnesota DNR’s BV/FSC certification be suspended until a thorough investigation confirms compliance with all applicable state and federal laws and FSC Principles and Criteria. All the harvesting permits, wood products tagged and certified, and wood products delivered to mills and retail outlets, under the current program should not retain sustainable certification.

IX. Summary of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Failures to Comply with FSC Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship

Principle 1: Compliance with Laws

- DNR failed to clearly define and consider the legal status of WMAs and federal aid lands in management decisions.
- DNR did not resolve disputes or engage regulatory agencies as required.
- These failures were documented by staff, FWS, OIG, and OLA.

Principle 2: Workers’ Rights and Employment Conditions

- Staff received conflicting directives and inadequate training.
- Employees faced retaliation for raising compliance concerns, violating ILO principles.

Principle 4: Community Relations

- DNR failed to consult with key stakeholders, including FWS, regarding management of federal aid lands.
- Mechanisms for resolving grievances and engaging affected communities were lacking.

Principle 5: Benefits from the Forest

- Harvest levels exceeded sustainable limits for some species.
- Negative impacts on wildlife habitat were not fully considered.

Principle 6: Environmental Values and Impacts

- Environmental assessments and monitoring were insufficient.
- Protections for rare and threatened species were weakened.
- Staff concerns about negative impacts were ignored.

Principle 7: Management Planning



- Management plans did not adequately address harm to wildlife habitat or incorporate stakeholder input.
- Monitoring and adaptive management were insufficient.

Principle 8: Monitoring and Assessment

- Monitoring focused on timber metrics, not wildlife or habitat outcomes.
- Research and staff input were excluded from planning and monitoring.

Principle 10: Implementation of Management Activities

- Regeneration and biodiversity considerations were inadequate, especially on FAW-administered lands.
- Best management practices for species of concern were not fully implemented.