

Sustainable Forest Management auditing of PEFC certified entities affected by restrictions due to COVID-19 – guidance

Version 3 (18/12/2020)

Background

Due to the spread of COVID-19 worldwide, travel and medical restrictions are affecting auditing activities. In order to give some flexibility to certification bodies and certified entities affected by the disease, PEFC is issuing the following guidance.

The main methods to ease the consequences of travel restrictions are the implementation of remote audits, and where this is not sufficient, the extension of time periods affecting the certificate. This guidance is based on IAF Informative Document on the Management of Extraordinary Events or Circumstances Affecting ABs, CABs and Certified Organizations (IAF ID 3: 2011 - Issue 1), IAF Mandatory Document for the Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Auditing/Assessment Purposes (IAF MD 4:2018 - Issue 2), and ISO 17021-1:2015.

Guidance

1 General procedures for the application of the specific rules of this guidance

A. The certification body shall establish a documented policy and process, outlining the steps it intends to take in case that a certified organization is affected by the COVID-19 event. The policy and process shall cover the affected organization, either an individually certified entity or a certified group organisation.

B. This documented policy and process should include an assessment of the risks of continuing certification, and where applicable a risk assessment and methodology for undertaking credible hybrid and remote audits, in accordance with IAF ID 3: 2011 Issue 1 and IAF MD 4:2018 Issue 2. The certification body may include hybrid audits or a combination of remote auditing and subsequent onsite verification within the risk assessment and methodology. For this combination option the certification body shall fully document the issues requiring onsite verification, and how to raise and manage findings.

C. Each case should be evaluated and documented by the certification body to provide evidence whether, and to what extent, the certified organization is affected by the COVID-19 event.

D. The certification body also needs to consider the risks related to cases where the planning/conducting of a full onsite audit is not practicable because reaching the organization's premises may be difficult or inadvisable for the auditor (e.g. restrictions because of national or local rules, health risks, flight cancellations, etc.) and consider if it is suitable a hybrid audit, where an auditor or technical expert is on site and the audit team leader is at a remote location.

E. These dispositions only apply to organisations which are affected by the COVID-19 event, according to the evaluation conducted by the certification body. They do not apply in any other case. As soon as travel and medical restrictions are lifted, audits shall be conducted as per the applicable standard and any other applicable procedures.

2 Initial and re-certification audits

A. Initial (Stage 2) and recertification audits may be on site or hybrid audits, but shall not be replaced by remote audits. Stage 1 (Pre-evaluation) audits may be performed hybrid or remotely if the certification body has documented a risk assessment and methodology for conducting credible hybrid or remote audits.

Note: Stage 1 is mainly concerned with verifying the management system documented information. The purpose of stage 2 is to evaluate the implementation, including effectiveness, of the organisation's management system and needs to take place on-site.

B. If a re-certification audit cannot be carried out the validity of certificates may be extended by a period of no more than six (6) months, which should then be reviewed as the six (6) month period comes to an end, based on the current travel and medical advice.

C. If the certification body has documented a risk assessment and methodology for conducting credible hybrid or remote audits, it may perform an additional hybrid or remote surveillance audit. Subject to a successful additional hybrid or remote audit the certificate may then be extended for 12 months from the original expiry date, which should then be reviewed as the 12-month period comes to an end.

3 Surveillance audits

A. Surveillance audits planned may be postponed a maximum of 6 months

B. If the certification body has documented a risk assessment and methodology for conducting credible hybrid or remote audits, it may perform hybrid or remote surveillance audits.

4 Internal monitoring programmes for group organisations

A. Where a Group Organisation is affected by the COVID restrictions, annual internal monitoring programmes may be postponed a maximum of 6 months or hybrid or remote internal monitoring programme carried out.

B. Any Group Organisation which wishes to conduct hybrid or remote internal monitoring shall submit a risk assessment and methodology to the certification body for approval.

5 Managing non-conformities

A. Where existing major non-conformities cannot be closed out without an onsite or hybrid audit, the certification body may extend the deadlines for close-out by up to six (6) months.

B. Where existing minor non-conformities cannot be closed out without an onsite or hybrid audit, the certification body may extend the deadlines for close-out by up to twelve (12) months.

C. If certification bodies are conducting hybrid or remote audits any non-conformities raised may be given extended close-out deadlines as above.

D. As soon as travel and medical restrictions are lifted Certification Bodies shall review all major non-conformities with extended deadlines, and carry out onsite audits as soon as possible.

6 Informing PEFC

A. The certification body shall immediately inform PEFC of any changes affecting the scope or expiry date of a certificate.

B. On request, the certification body shall provide the documented information as required by this guidance document to the PEFC Council.