Support Paper #2:
Biodiversity Conservation in the 2015 Sustainable Agriculture Standard

Biodiversity conservation has always been a central focus of SAN's work and the SAN Sustainable Agriculture Standard. This focus remains for the 2015 standard, but some changes have been made to increase the delivery of key outcomes for natural ecosystems and wildlife while improving the clarity and interpretability of biodiversity requirements for producers and auditors.

Biodiversity topics that were addressed in Principles 2 and 3 of the 2010 Standard (a total of 15 criteria) are now consolidated into 12 criteria within Principle 2 of the 2015 standard. The draft 2015 standard includes two new topics: invasive species and human-wildlife conflict. Aside from these, the topics covered remain largely the same. Key changes are noted below.

Certification eligibility based on prior destruction of natural ecosystems

The 2010 standard excluded any farm that destroyed high value ecosystems (HVEs) subsequent to November 2005 from SAN certification. The 2015 standard retains this cutoff date, but replaces the HVE concept with the more widely-used High Conservation Value (HCV) approach to identifying the most critical habitats and ecosystems.

The HCV framework has been developed and refined by conservation experts over many years, and is used by many other standards systems to help identify critical areas for protection. Use of the HCV concept in lieu of HVE can facilitate benchmarking between SAN and other standards and also enables SAN producers and audits to take advantage of the range of HCV-related tools and services that are now available (see www.hcvnetwork.org for more information). A new provision in the 2015 standard (criterion 2.2) also excludes from certification any farm that has destroyed natural ecosystems within the past five years. Together with the fixed 2005 cutoff date for HCV destruction, this provision will guarantee that SAN-certified products do not come from farms that have recently destroyed natural forests or other natural ecosystems.

Conservation of existing natural ecosystems

Like the 2010 standard, the 2015 standard requires certified producers to conserve natural ecosystems present on-site at the time of first certification. Producers have several options for achieving such conservation, including strict protection, restoration of degraded ecosystems, or "sustainable management" that permits selective timber harvest and other non-destructive use. In this way, natural ecosystems remain as important economic assets for the farm.

One subtle but important change is the allowance for "minor conversion" of natural ecosystems, in very limited quantities and only for specified purposes – namely, for smallholders to plant food crops or for farms to install or upgrade farm infrastructure. This new provision introduces a level of flexibility for producers to meet basic needs and manage for changing conditions (including climate change). In combination with the protection and restoration requirements noted below, the 2015 standard is overall as strong in its conservation requirements, but affords producers greater flexibility to decide where and how to incorporate natural ecosystems, thus reducing potential tradeoffs with other farm objectives.

Taken together, the requirements related to prior ecosystem destruction as well as conservation of existing natural ecosystems ensure that SAN-certified products are "deforestation-free" and protect High Carbon Stock forests, according to how these terms and concepts are generally being defined and implemented. The 2015 version continues to position SAN with a very high standard for ecosystem protection.

Protection and restoration of on-farm vegetation

Criterion 2.4 introduces the requirement for all farms or producer groups to have a minimum total level of natural ecosystems or diverse non-crop vegetation on their farms – totaling at least 10% for farms producing non-shade-tolerant crops, or at least 20% for farms producing cattle or shade-tolerant crops. This requirement replaces, in part, criterion 2.8 (specific agroforestry tree cover parameters), which had proven impracticable for many producers, given regional variation in suitable management of shade-tolerant crops. The new approach is both stronger – requiring all producers to contribute to on-farm conservation and plant diversification – and more flexible – enabling producers to select where and how to incorporate new plantings or restored habitats if they fall below the required thresholds. The new standard also prioritizes the protection of large native trees (criterion 2.6), which are valuable repositories of biodiversity where they are remnants of former tropical forests.

Protection of wildlife and endangered species

Overall, the 2015 standard provides a simpler set of requirements related to wildlife conservation, while retaining key provisions to protect endangered species and avoid the over-exploitation of all native flora and fauna. Hunting remains prohibited, except that smallholders may hunt non-endangered species for non-commercial use only. This exception respects the importance of wild-caught protein sources in local diets in some regions, such as the forests of West Africa. New criteria related to invasive species and human-wildlife conflict have been added because of the economic as well as conservation significance of these two issues on farms in many parts of the world.

Clarity on definitions and interpretation

To assist producers and auditors in implementing the biodiversity requirements in the 2015 standard, clearer definitions and interpretation manuals are being developed. These resources will help clarify potential "grey areas" in the identification of natural ecosystems and HCVs and provide clear protocols to assess conformance to the relevant criteria. Definitions of these and other biodiversity-related terms are found in Annex 4 of the present draft, while a more detailed interpretation manual will be published alongside the final standard.