

A major pilot of Helveta's timber tracking software and radio frequency identification system has been completed in Malaysia. And the Oxford-based company now predicts take-up of its technology growing worldwide as pressure mounts on supplier countries and individual supplier companies to verify wood legality and sustainability.

The Malaysian project was carried out in a 129,143ha concession in the state of Terengganu in conjunction with the Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia (FDPM) and Terengganu State Forestry Department.

"We put in a tender to the FDPM with other systems providers," said Helveta's Asia Pacific business development director Michel Trudelle. "But ours was the only technology tested in the field."

Helveta's CI World software, he explained, is designed to "monitor and manage timber assets across the entire supply chain", helping companies and forestry bodies "maintain accurate inventory and production information in real time".

"We establish and support the software on the user's



Forestry workers in Terengganu use handhelds to read RFID tags on the trees

On the trail

server, whether that's an individual company or a body like the FDPM," said Mr Trudelle. "They can then use it to gather and display information related to the timber products supply chain for their own use or make it restricted or open access on the internet."

The Terengganu project started with TSFD forest officers undertaking a forest inventory in the concession, tagging the trees to be tracked with RFID labels. They then used handheld computers loaded with CI Mobile data capture software to read these and record additional information on each tree.

"The data is next transferred to the CI World system on the central server, which can be done via internet or mobile phone connection," said Mr Trudelle.

The forestry workers, he added, had little trouble learning to use the technology. "The most common excuses for organisations resisting using the system is that their people on the ground are not so computer savvy," he said. "But while we met unforeseen problems, as with implementation of any system, such as instances of felled trees uprooting and burying the RFID tag, ways were found around them and generally people were using the handhelds happily within a day."

The CI World software is also straightforward to implement, says Helveta, as it's designed to be configured to the needs of the client by "replicating processes and reports used in their [existing] procedures".

Sawn timber produced from logs from the concession was also tracked and the data fed to the central computer. The system could then be used to "check, analyse and reconcile" captured information, issuing alerts when supply chain inconsistencies were identified.

Reports produced from the data can include pre-harvest inventories and it can also generate corporate and official documents, such as shipping waybills and "removal passes", which verify that wood is registered and above board and that duty will be paid on it.

Helveta hopes that the pilot study will now lead to state-wide implementation of its tracking system in Terengganu and ultimately its use on a national basis.

Malaysia, it points out, is in continuing negotiation on signing a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) under the EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade initiative, which would assure its timber

Malaysia is the latest test bed for UK-designed timber tracking technology. Mike Jeffree reports

unfettered access to European markets. As part of this, and with environmental concerns tightening timber procurement procedures elsewhere, the country is looking to improve transparency and traceability in the timber supply chain generally (see p17).

"The system was deployed in Terengganu to demonstrate its potential as a national timber legality assurance system in Peninsular Malaysia," said Helveta sales and marketing vice-president Martin de la Serna.

The company also has a contract for a national tracking system in Ghana, the first country to sign a FLEGT VPA, and is discussing setting one up in the second, the Republic of Congo. It has one in place in Liberia, is in talks with fellow VPA hopeful Cameroon and says interest is also being expressed in central and South America.

Helveta is also in close consultation with environmental NGOs and certification verification operations, like SGS and Bureau Veritas, in the development and implementation of its technology. "It's been an integral part of the whole process and they've been very enthusiastic about it," said Mr Trudelle.

The estimated cost of setting up and operating the Helveta system is around US\$1/m³ of timber, but Mr Trudelle said this is defrayed by improvements in business management it can also produce.

"It is a very valuable management tool, giving the user instant access to a range of information which can help administration and planning," he said. "Previously a forestry or timber business would have to plough through a pile of paper to work out how many logs they supplied on a given day; with our system they can find out instantly and accurately."

This combination of environmental and commercial drivers, Helveta says, means a growing spread of industry stakeholders are interested in online and RFID tracking.

"It's still a niche market, but growing fast," said Mr Trudelle. "Initial take-up was from government bodies and agencies and big concessions, but now we're seeing individual mills and timber companies seeing the benefits and becoming increasingly enthusiastic adopters." ■

SUMMARY

- Helveta's CIWorld timber tracking system has been piloted in a 129,143ha forest concession in Peninsular Malaysia.
- The technology uses radio frequency ID tags on the trees and timber.
- Costing US\$1/m³, it also aids business management.
- The system is also in use or being evaluated in Africa, Central and South America.