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Ver 9 December 2020

Forest Ecosystem Restoration

Verification

Assessment

Report for:

Alvelal

in

**Granada, Almería, and Murcia,
Spain**

Report Finalized: 09/March/2021
Audit Dates: 26-28 January 2021
Audit Team: Mateo Cariño Fraise (lead auditor)
Rui Simões

Certificate issue/expiry: 09/March/2021
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TABLE of CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
1 AUDIT CONCLUSIONS	4
2 AUDIT PROCESS	10
3 Organization DETAILS	13
Annex I: FER standard conformance checklist (confidential) .	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Annex II: List of all visited sites (confidential)	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Annex III: Detailed list of stakeholders consulted (confidential).....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Annex IV: List of documents and records (confidential)	Error! Bookmark not defined.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of an independent certification audit conducted by a team of specialists representing Preferred by Nature. The purpose of the audit was to evaluate the ecological, economic and social performance of Alvelal restoration initiative as defined by the established Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard (Version 1.0) by Preferred by Nature.

Dispute resolution: If Preferred by Nature clients encounter organisations or individuals having concerns or comments about Preferred by Nature and our services, these parties are strongly encouraged to contact relevant Preferred by Nature regional office. Formal complaints and concerns should be sent in writing.

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1 AUDIT CONCLUSIONS

1.1 Audit Recommendation and certification decision

Based on Organisation's conformance with certification requirements, the following recommendation is made:

- Verification approved:
Upon acceptance of NCR(s) issued below

- Verification not approved:

Additional comments, including issues identified as controversial or hard to evaluate and explanation of the conclusion reached: NA

1.2 Non-conformity Reports (NCRs)

- Check if no NCR(s) have been issued

NCR: 01/2021	NC Classification: minor
Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 1.4.6
Report Section:	Annex 1
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
The Organization has shown in the field reference areas, within the Alvelal plateau, that illustrate the objective state of the restoration sites. Those are based in the maps of series of vegetation of Andalucía developed by the public administration (Junta de Andalucía). These areas are nevertheless only generally set, not specifically and clearly enough defined to be able to compare and provide target values that would allow definitive comparison or status reports in terms of progress towards the target condition, or to provide a perspective due to changing conditions etc. as per the requirement.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next annual surveillance audit, but not later than 12 months from report finalization (08/March/2022)
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 02/2021	NC Classification: minor
Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 1.6.2
Report Section:	Annex 1
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
The reference ecosystem has been defined, using the vegetation series and explaining the expected successional pathway. The overall goals and objectives have also been defined, using the 3 zones model, natural, mixed, and economic, that are very much interlinked, but while there is an annual definition of the annual objectives there isn't a 5-year and 20-years planning that includes also the desired restoration outcomes.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next annual surveillance audit, but not later than 12 months from report finalization (08/March/2022)
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 03/2021	NC Classification: minor
Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 1.6.3
Report Section:	Annex 1
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
Currently, Alvelal has a framework agreement with their initial and main funder (CommonLand) over 5 years (with the expressed intent to be maintained over 20 years). The discussions with the funder revealed that they are aware that longer agreed funding would boost the work and are currently discussing options for multi year funding but that does not include any current commitment on financial resources past 5 years yet. Alvelal has also agreements with other smaller funds but none of them provide specific financial resources beyond a 5-year period and there is no evidence that Alvelal has taken steps to plan for financial sustainability on a longer period.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next annual surveillance audit, but not later than 12 months from report finalization (08/March/2022)
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 04/2021	NC Classification: minor
Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 1.7
Report Section:	Annex 1
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
The restoration techniques as explained in the planning documentation are very limited. They are actually more detailed in the monitoring reports (which come after the activity has been carried out), but even those are not to the level of what the RM requires, as per what was observed in the field and during the discussions for proper implementation for good performance. They are for example too generic in the use or not of machinery, how to make good holes for planting, etc., which are things that were said to be key for success, as stated by the RM himself.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next annual surveillance audit, but not later than 12 months from report finalization (08/March/2022)
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 05/2021	NC Classification: minor
Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 2.1
Report Section:	Annex 1
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
Management rights are documented and respected for the areas where Alvelal has made or is making interventions, i.e., by agreements with the private landowners or the public bodies. But there is a divergence of status of these. For example, while there is a general framework agreement with the public administration for acting in public lands, a more specific agreement is required for the actual activities in the medium or longer term. While for some areas/projects, e.g., the Cortijo del Conejo, an agreement for the custody of the land (<i>Acuerdo de Custodia del Territorio</i>) is about to be finalized for 5 years, for other public areas (e.g. Parque de María-Los Vélez) agreements have been documented on an "intervention-basis" only. Also, the agreements with the private landowners do not include a timeframe as required. A plan for or process by which it will come to more definitive agreements over time was not provided either.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next annual surveillance audit, but not later than 12 months from report finalization (08/March/2022)

Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 06/2021	NC Classification: minor
Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 2.3
Report Section:	Annex 1
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
While the Organization has used different ways to deal with conflicts, there is not a documented dispute resolution mechanism that can be transparently followed-up on or used by all parties, if and when necessary.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next annual surveillance audit, but not later than 12 months from report finalization (08/March/2022)
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 07/2021	NC Classification: minor
Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 3.2
Report Section:	Annex 1
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
Selected species are well matched to ecologic conditions (climate, water, pests and other risks) and provenance seems known and appropriately chosen. The selection includes species from several development stages of the identified floristic successions. As such 19 native species were selected with trees including <i>Pinus sp.</i> , three <i>Juniperus sp.</i> and two <i>Quercus sp.</i> . Shrubs selected include species with functional interest (e.g. for nitrogen fixation and fauna) such as <i>Retama</i> , <i>Genista</i> and <i>Crataegus</i> for restoration purposes.	
Although described adequacy to actual climate, no clear consideration was given to climate change resiliency in terms of regional available scenarios or other information for the selected species.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next annual surveillance audit, but not later than

	12 months from report finalization (08/March/2022)
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 08/2021	NC Classification: minor
Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 3.4
Report Section:	Annex 1
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
Seedling survival is checked in several designed transects after the first and second summers post-planting. Replanting where there have been unsuccessful plants seems to be planned according to the survival monitoring works, implying in some cases the replanting of different species, where necessary. At field level (in el Cortijico and la Muela) some unsuccessful planting establishment cases did not seem to be the focus for replanting. It was also not clear in written planning documents how these cases are to be addressed. Some working documents do describe measures to address this requirement (e.g in the <i>Memoria 19</i> , and <i>Informe fin de obra version final</i>).	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	By the next annual surveillance audit, but not later than 12 months from report finalization (08/March/2022)
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

1.3 Observations

Note: Observations are issued for the early stages of a problem which does not of itself constitute a non-conformance, but which the auditor considers may lead to a future non-conformance if not addressed by the organization; observations may lead to direct non-conformances if not addressed.

No observations

OBS: 01/2021	Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 1.4.1
	Report Section	Annex 1
Description of findings leading to observation:	Prior and current conditions and land use has been provided for the Alvelal Territory, from Granada to Murcia, mainly through the "Plan Restauración Zonas Naturales 2016" and the "Documentos Alvelal Preferred by Nature" documents. Further details are provided for the specific restoration areas, as e.g in the "Cortijo del Conejo Restoration Project". While this includes environmental, social, and socio-economic conditions, the social part is very limited and should develop further on e.g., community watershed areas, cultural heritage sites, governance practices, engagement etc. To the credit of Alvelal, some of these aspects are already taken into account in the actual implementation of the project, especially since most of the staff are local to the project area. That said, the project would benefit by developing these further and incorporating into plans or other documentation for more systematic consideration.	
Observation:	The Organization should develop further the background regarding the social conditions in their Restoration Plan.	

OBS: 02/2021	Standard & Requirement:	Forest Ecosystem Restoration Standard, vs. 1.0, 1.4.2
	Report Section	Annex 1
Description of findings leading to observation:	Threats and degradation drivers are considered in the restoration project practises, as observed by the audit team and clarified during the interviews. The main planning document is the "Plan Restauración Zonas Naturales 2016", which includes this information in a somehow inconsistent manner. For example, forest fires are said to be important in the plan for the Cortijo del Conejo but not mentioned in the overall planning documentation, which is currently being updated. Alvelal plans to clarify this aspect further and link clearly the threats and degradation drivers with each of the areas, as the project area is vast and conditions are different.	
Observation:	The Organization should address further in the Restoration Plan the threats and drivers for degradation to ensure all are covered in a consistent manner.	

1.4 Stakeholder consultation

The project is already a multistakeholder initiative, where Alvelal is the Resource Manager (RM) but many other parties are involved at different levels, from private owners to public bodies. The assessment being a field test, the stakeholder consultation was limited and has focused only on these two groups.

The table below summarizes the issues identified by the assessment team with a brief discussion of each based upon specific interview and/or public meeting comments.

Principle/Subject Area	Stakeholder comment	Preferred by Nature response
1: Planning	No relevant comments received	
2: Tenure & Security	No relevant comments received	
3: Implementation	Stakeholders indicated that the restoration work is exactly what the public administration would like to do, but since it's lacking enough funds it's great to be able to build on this initiative.	No response needed
4: Monitoring and Reporting	No relevant comments received	

1.5 Actions taken by Organisation Prior to Report Finalization

No changes or information have been provided after the closing meeting.

2 AUDIT PROCESS

2.2 Standard Used

Standards Used (including version):	Forest Ecosystems Restoration Standard, vs 1.0
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2.3 Audit Team and accompanying persons

Name	Role and qualifications
Mateo Cariño Fraisse	Lead auditor. Mateo is Land Use Program Manager at Preferred by Nature, with extensive experience in forestry and carbon auditing (FSC, PEFC, CCB, VCS, Gold Standard, Plan Vivo, Carbon Footprint Management, SAI, etc.) and projects since 2000 worldwide. Mateo has also been providing forestry auditing training, including High Conservation Values and Ecosystem Services, for over 15 years internationally, and is currently leading the Preferred by Nature Forest Ecosystem Restoration Initiative that is aiming to support the global effort in restoration by bring field accountability to this growing trend.

Rui Simões	Restoration expert. Rui is a forestry engineer with more than 20 years of experience in different forest project, management and works. Author of several fluvial and predesertic restoration projects and field works. FSC, PEFC in SBP and COC auditor for NEPCon. EU nature conservancy and climate projects evaluator. PhD Climate Change student writing thesis about Rural Landscape for Adaptation and Mitigation of Climate Change. International experience working on english, spanish and french language, besides mother tongue portuguese.
Richard Donovan	Richard implemented a technical review of the Alvelal draft report. Richard is an independent senior forest advisor to Preferred by Nature. Richard has 30 plus years of experience as a forest auditor and field experience implementing restoration in temperate, tropical and subtropical ecosystems.

2.4 Audit Overview

Note: The table below provides an overview of the audit scope and auditors. See standard checklist annex for specific details on people interviewed and audit findings per site audited.

Site(s)	Date(s)	Main activities	Auditor(s)
Vélez-Blanco	26 January	Opening meeting and initial discussion	Mateo Cariño Fraise and Rui Simões
Chririvel	26 January	Visit to private and public areas with restoration activities. Stakeholder meeting and workers interviews.	Mateo Cariño Fraise and Rui Simões
Vélez-Rubio	26 January	Visit to private areas with restoration activities. Interviews with field staff.	Mateo Cariño Fraise and Rui Simões
Vélez-Blanco	27 January	Documentation review.	Mateo Cariño Fraise and Rui Simões
Vélez-Blanco	27 January	Visit to public areas with restoration activities.	Mateo Cariño Fraise and Rui Simões
Caravaca de la Cruz	27 January	Visit to private areas with restoration activities. Interviews.	Mateo Cariño Fraise and Rui Simões
Vélez-Blanco	28 January	Final documentation review. Closing meeting.	Mateo Cariño Fraise and Rui Simões
Total number of person days used: 8 = numbers of auditors participating 2 X number of days spent in preparation, on site and post site visit follow-up including stakeholder consultation 4.			

2.5 Description of Overall Audit Process

The Organization has sent all the main documents to the audit team a few weeks before the audit, so the team was able to check them and prepare for the field work in advance.

The assessment was planned to visit restoration sites in all three provinces where the project is working (Granada, Almería, and Murcia), and cover both private and public sites. The areas in Granada were not visited because the interventions there had not started yet and furthermore there was a need to spend more time at desk so that the RM could get more familiar with both the auditing and the FER standard, which is normal being a pilot test of a new standard, and the team with the multiplicity of documentation produced in different formats for the different projects. Also, the focus of the audit team extended beyond the natural areas to the agricultural areas, since the two are both necessary to make the project successful, restoring some areas through the regenerative agriculture and thus helping sustain the social network.

It was initially difficult also for the audit team to understand the scope of the project, since the areas where Alvelal is working very much depend on the funding received and the funders' interests and the different projects presented a variety of statuses of completion, from completed to without even an agreement on the areas to work at.

The audit team was also able to interview some workers as they were performing restoration activities in the field. In addition they were able to interview several of the Alvelal staff and some board members of the Alvelal association.

2.5.1 List of sites selected for evaluation

Site Name	Rationale for Selection
Finca Javier Egea	Private area. Type of fund covering the several restoration activities.
El Cortijico	Public area, different types of activities (including drone seeding). High Conservation Value attributes. Workers in the field.
Finca Antonio Maurandi	Private area with several types of interventions. Discussion with board member.
La Muela	Public area, different types of activities in very steep slope and difficult conditions.
Finca La Junquera	Private area with several types of restoration interventions. Restoration camp. Interview with Alvelal President.

2.5.2 List of management aspects reviewed by assessment team

Type of site	Sites visited	Type of site	Sites visited
Road construction		Illegal settlement	
Soil drainage		Bridges/stream crossing	1
Workshop		Chemical storage	
Tree nursery		Wetland	1
Planned Harvest site		Steep slope/erosion	1
Ongoing Harvest site		Riparian zone	1
Completed logging		Planting	1

Soil scarification	1	Direct seeding	1
Planting site	1	Weed control	
Felling by harvester		Natural regeneration	1
Felling by forest worker		Endangered species	
Skidding/Forwarding		Wildlife management	
Clearfelling/Clearcut		Nature Reserve	1
Shelterwood management		Key Biotope	
Selective felling		Special management area	1
Sanitation cutting		Historical site	
Pre-commercial thinning		Recreational site	
Commercial thinning		Buffer zone	
Camp	1	Local community	1

3 Organization DETAILS

3.2 Organization specific background information

Ownership and land tenure description (legal and customary)

Alvelal is located in Southern Spain, roughly in between the cities of Granada and Murcia. The Alvelal territory covers parts of the autonomous communities of Andalusia and Murcia, which each have several provinces and comarcas – the local denomination for districts. The name Alvelal relates to the first letters of the comarcas where the initiative started: Altiplano de Granada, Los Vélez and Alto Almanzora. More recently the comarcas of Guadix and Noroeste de Murcia were added to the landscape. Today, the Alvelal territory covers more than 1,000,000 hectares of degraded steppe called the Altiplano Estepario.

Alvelal is an association of farmers, businesses, researchers and other institutions with the same vision of the future. Alvelal consists of a board of 9 board members and a team of 11 people working to make this a success. The team has two coordinators who share the responsibilities and who bridge the gap between the team and the board and donors. Management rights are documented and respected for the areas where Alvelal has made or is making interventions, i.e., by agreements with the private landowners or the public bodies as the regional Government of Andalusia.

Environmental Context

The Altiplano consists of an open landscape, rich in spectacular rock formations with a relatively smooth relief and in sharp contrast with the mountain ranges surrounding the plain. The Altiplano Estepario is a Mediterranean semi-arid steppe. It is a plain without trees (apart from those near rivers), covered with grass or shrubs. The steppe is a transition zone in between deserts and forest areas, where it is too dry to have a forest, but the soil is too moist for a desert. It opens-up to gullies generating what is referred to as a "badland-landscape". The vegetation consists of tall grasses such as esparto. The potential vegetation consists particularly of *Quercus Ilex* and *Quercus coccifera*, which together exceed 95% of the Altiplano's surface.

The Altiplano is characterized by a high floral diversity, offering diverse habitats particularly for invertebrates and steppe-birds. In the Hoya of Guadix and Baza more than 500 species of beetles (*Coleoptera*) and butterflies (*Lepidoptera*) can be found. The Altiplano offers a home to populations of steppe-birds such as the Black-bellied sandgrouse (*Pterocles orientalis*) and the Trumpete finch (*Bucanethes githagineus*). The mountain ranges in Alvelal are mostly part of protected natural spaces. The area

presents enormous geological and geomorphological heterogeneity, which, together with the climatic rigor forced by its geographical location, has resulted in an enormous floristic and faunal richness.

There are four natural parks in total, the Sierra de Castril, the Sierra Nevada, the Sierra María - Los Vélez and the Sierra de Baza. There are also two natural monuments: a spectacular rock formation called Peña de Castril and a landscape of ravines and deep-trenched gullies close to Guadix, called the Cárcavas de Marchal. The almond tree monoculture, the fragmentation of habitats, the loss of cereal cultivation, the expansion of road infrastructures are the main causes of biodiversity loss. In the area there are several species of animals that are on the lists of endangered or vulnerable species.

Socioeconomic Context

Since 1956 the size of the natural and semi-natural areas in the Altiplano decreased significantly, mainly by conversion of lands for dry land farming. Some 52,000 hectares (out of 240,000 hectares in the Andalusian part of the Altiplano) have been transitioned from herbaceous crops, such as cereals and esparto, into tree crops such as almonds and olives. Although relatively few hectares are irrigated in the Altiplano, there is an increasing trend in irrigated farming. More recent trends include the introduction of more productive varieties as well as new crops (notably in horticulture). Another important trend in the land use of the Altiplano is the development of infrastructure related to renewable energy (solar and wind) and the expansion of industrial areas close to bigger municipalities.

The unemployment rate is currently between 15% and 40%, although during the worst moments of recent years it has reached between 40% and 60%. Many people, especially the young, have emigrated in search of work in the cities, which has resulted in the decrease of activities and services in all sectors, and especially in the worrying aging of the local population. In addition to this, the economic problems of the region have been aggravated by the recent economic crisis. The effect of overexploitation, deforestation, loss of land cover and inefficient land use planning have been exacerbated by climate change, resulting in a disruption of the natural balance and landscape productivity. All this together has a negative effect on economic activity and puts social cohesion and employment at risk.

3.3 General overview of the organization and scope

As mentioned above, Alvelal is an association of farmers, businesses, researchers and other institutions: Alvelal aims to transform 1.000.000 hectares in the next 20 years. As a first phase, Alvelal has a Natural Zone Restoration Plan, which is the scope of the FER assessment, for 2017-2022, and it is currently being updated to restore 10.826 hectares of land across private farms and public land in 8 areas of the Altiplano.

Management rights are documented and respected for the areas where Alvelal has made or is making interventions, i.e., by agreements with the private landowners or the public bodies such as the regional Government of Andalusia, but the content of the agreements may differ depending on the status of restoration, as each agreement happens only when interventions or funds are allocated for specific restoration activities and for that duration (see NCR: 05/2021).