
What Is Public Trust?

(First in a series)

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ARTICLE

What takes a long time to earn but only an instant to lose? The answer is public trust. The concept of public trust includes the belief that certain individuals in society are privileged to have practice rights and a title, with the expectation that they will hold the interests of society above their own interests. For example, fire fighters and police officers have the right to detain the public, or act on your property and call themselves firefighter or police officer. In exchange, they promise to protect you and members of the public, even in the face of potential personal danger. When they, individually and as a collective, act in this manner, they are putting society's interests above their own.

Public trust is the degree to which the public believes that the profession and the professional will act in a particular way that serves and protects the public's interest.

We trust professionals for a variety of reasons. Trust can be based on the person, the credentials, their uniform, and/or our experience. You may trust your doctor because she went to a top medical school or because she's a nice person with great bedside manner. The same is true when it comes to forestry. The people of your community will trust you because you're an approachable person, or because you take the time to explain things to them, or because you have an RPF or RFT designation after your name. Regardless of the reason, they are giving over their vulnerability, risk and values to your judgement and decisions. This social exchange of recognition and empowerment for acting in society's best interest is referred to as public trust.

Public trust in forestry can be presented schematically as follows:



The professional receives exclusive rights to practice and the ACBFP receives the right to self-regulate professional practice and members. In exchange, society receives assurance that only competent members undertake the practice and that they do so in the public interest.

Society needs confidence that certain aspects of everyday life are attended to in order to function properly. If every member of society needed to become knowledgeable about a circumstance, consider all possibilities, and make a decision, then nothing would ever get done. And things that were done --would likely not be done correctly. So society needs to trust individuals who have dedicated their education and careers to a specific line of work. Those individuals who are best positioned to establish the level of care that is required for the public are the community of professionals themselves. This is the importance and privilege of self-regulation.

Citizens trust that treatments such as a harvest of the forest that are conducted by government and companies, will provide suitable benefits to society and protect the forest for future generations because of the decisions and involvement of forest professionals in those treatments. Society has entrusted that those who hold the title 'professional forester' or 'registered forest technologist' or 'natural resource professional' not only have the necessary knowledge, but also apply that knowledge for their employer in the interest of society and the forest. Therefore, a constant focus of the profession is to ensure that the work of the ABCFP is aimed at achieving the requirements and expectations identified in the *Foresters Act*.

Self-regulation requires the active participation of the community of practitioners and their adherence to a common set of principles and practice. Professional principles including honesty, competency and understanding society's values are important ingredients to practice. In the last few decades, there have been several stark examples of a public trust failure – just look at the accounting profession in the US and Enron.

The most recent public opinion poll – which was conducted by an independent survey company in fall 2014 – shows that the people of BC do trust forest professionals. In the survey, we learned that all resource professionals are trusted much more than other groups such as politicians, environmentalists and journalists. You can find a full report on the survey on our website on the Surveys and Polls page.

While it's great that forest professionals are seen to be trustworthy, the numbers are not that high. Only 32% of respondents reported that RPFs were perceived as the most trusted and 26% reported that RFTs were the second most trusted resource professional. There's a lot of room for improvement.

Other groups can put a strain on the trust the public has for the profession of forestry. For example, untruthful or misleading statements made in the media can erode public trust. We can't control what the media prints but we can comment on it. Part of our *Code of Ethics* is to "...promote truthful and accurate statements on forestry matters." If you see a misleading statement, write a letter to the editor or e-mail the journalist directly. Just be sure to present factual information rather than emotionally responding to the error.

Public trust must be constantly monitored and treasured to make sure we meet the expectations of society. It is not something that you look at once a year, but rather something you incorporate into your practice on a daily basis.

This article is the first in a series. In future articles, we'll try to answer the following questions:

- Do we have the public's trust?
- How does the ABCFP work to achieve the public's trust?
- How do forest professionals pursue public trust?



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