
Pursuing Public Trust

(Fourth in a series)

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By Mike Larock, RPF, director of professional practice and forest stewardship; and
Megan Hanacek, RPF, RPBio, forest stewardship specialist

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In this final article in our series on public trust, we'll look at the next steps with public trust: How do we maximize opportunities for improvement? Public trust must be the most important item on our agendas. We practise professional forestry and provide insight on appropriate forest stewardship decisions for our employer, and our credibility as forest professionals is imbedded in the expectation that our practice and stewardship insight is applied within the public interest. That is to say, our employment obligations related to professional practice and our public interest obligations are part of the same requirements.

In our first article (What Is Public Trust?) we examined the definition of public trust, the expectation of a public duty, and how forest professionals stack up against other natural resource professionals on a survey that measures how much the public trusts us.

In the second article (Do We Have the Public's Trust?) we looked at whether we are trusted as professionals by the public and how we can monitor that trust. We discussed the fact that the behaviour of a few rogue members can have a detrimental effect on the profession as a whole.

In the third article (How Does the ABCFP Achieve the Public's Trust?) we looked at the work being done by the ABCFP on behalf of the profession as a whole. Two of the key attributes are being transparent and providing a balanced view on forestry matters.

Today, the public hears a lot about uncertainty in the forest. Fires, insect infestations, damaged trees, water supply issues, floods, and more have put pressure on the forest ecosystem. In turn, there is increasing pressure on the forest professional to find solutions and meet the broadening appetite of the public for homes in the urban/forest interface, recreation experiences for families, a place of employment, products and pipelines. The public, mostly centered in urban settings, has expectations that the professional can protect the fragile forest and continue to provide the expected benefits.

The promise of public trust has never had so great a challenge. The profession, the professionals and our partners are meeting this challenge by pursuing public trust, including strengthening the team approach in the management of forest land, exercising independence in professional practice, facilitating consultation with stakeholders and others. How do we change the pressure of expectation and prospect of instability into a goal of maximizing the interest in a public resource? The answer is with communication.

First, anything that encourages the public to talk about the forest resource in BC is great! And we, as forest professionals, can do a lot to maintain that interest. Little

things you do make a big difference. Such as, being available for a public meeting; making the time to talk to that out-spoken person; or reaching out to a special interest group can put you and the profession in a good light. Even when people disagree with you, they will respect that you took the time to talk to them and listen to their concerns.

When you are open to communicating, the public will begin to trust you. They know you are the professional with on-the-ground knowledge and the ability to apply that knowledge in a way that derives benefits for the province. We recommend that you touch base with as many segments of the public as possible -- and not just the squeaky wheels – when activities impact them.

As the primary forest land manager, forest professionals often encounter outspoken members of the public. In these situations we must work harder and show respect to achieve a useful and practical outcome. You can't go into a conversation with the public with guns blazing and then expect to get good results.

Most of us think we're only professionals involved with the hard science of forest management but really we're also social science 'bridge builders.' We have to bridge the divide between segments of society and various uses, between our employers and others, and between the public and the forest. Not only do we have an obligation to listen to what the public says and ask questions, but we have just as strong an obligation to bring that information back to our employers either directly as feedback or indirectly in our professional opinions and recommendations. Employer interest and public interest are joined together.

Having a good connection with the public and touching base with them regularly in order to keep the dialogue going is an important continuous step. An open and regular dialogue with the public will help you anticipate problems that may be on the horizon. You'll be able to adapt your work in the early stages and alert yourself and others to aspects of forest management that require work.

The good news is that many of you already do this under various means such as FSP obligations and voluntary certification standards. If you are already engaged and making the effort, it's worth it to make sure you are being as effective as possible. Check out the list of tools in our second article (Do We Have the Public's Trust?)

Public trust occurs when people trust you regardless of the type of message you are bringing. Being a trustworthy forest professional will serve you well wherever and however you practise throughout your career.



Ensuring BC's Forests Are In Good Hands.