

State Programs to Credential Foresters

A Position of the Society of American Foresters

Initially adopted by the Society on November 14, 1985, subsequently revised and extended by Council on December 16, 1996. Expired December 16, 2001. Revised and extended again on December 5, 2004 and will expire on December 5, 2009 unless, after subsequent review, Council decides otherwise.

Position

The Society of American Foresters (SAF) supports state credentialing requirements for foresters implemented through state licensing and registration mandates. Forester credentialing is a necessary component of state laws designed to establish and maintain professional accountability, sustain forest values and services, and promote public confidence in the profession. Forester credentialing benefits the public and protects the interests of individuals seeking the services of a forester, as well as foresters themselves. Ultimately, forester credentialing is designed to sustain both the ecological and the economic forest benefits provided by forestry to society by ensuring a specified level of professional qualification and competence. Additionally, the SAF believes that forester credentialing enforced via state licensure statutes is a preferable alternative to prescriptive regulation of management practices in meeting both private and public forest resource management objectives. The SAF Certified Forester® program is well designed to be recognized by state governments as a standard credential for professional forestry practice.

Issue

Many actions of a forester can affect forestland for decades and even centuries. Timber harvesting for example and other management practices can influence the value that forest owners receive for their timber and the residual value of the forest stand, as well as environmental values such as water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and landscape aesthetics. Forest management prescriptions may involve the planning and supervision of timber harvesting and road construction, use of pesticides and prescribed fire, or other on-the-ground management tools that can have a substantial effect on the environment. Ensuring that individuals are adequately trained and qualified to develop and implement scientifically sound and socially responsible forest management prescriptions is thus an important contribution to public health, safety, and welfare.

The current lack of mandatory forester credentialing in most states creates a vacuum of professional accountability, marginalizes excellent forestry practice in the marketplace, and is a missed opportunity to build and maintain social license and public credibility in the profession and its practice. Currently, the profession uses a code of ethics to regulate itself. However, this has not been adequate in the eyes of some, particularly those who would like to see a more prescriptive approach to forest management. As a result many state and municipal governments

have enacted regulations seeking to mitigate the effects, real and perceived, of forest practices on public values. Many of these regulations have resulted in unintended and perverse consequences such as eroding private property rights, creating inequitable barriers to landowners' ability to provide private and public values from forest management, and accelerating premature conversion of forestland to alternate land uses. Forestry practice laws, specifically those prescribing one-size-fits-all silvicultural practices across diverse ownerships and land management objectives, are poor surrogates to professional judgement and are generally insufficiently flexible to effectively respond to the unique and complex circumstances of landowner objectives, site conditions, public values, and market conditions.

In addition to forestland owners and the public, foresters themselves benefit from credentialing programs by ensuring that individuals with inadequate training or skills are not misrepresenting themselves to prospective clients or the public. All foresters suffer when an individual client or the public is adversely affected by the actions of unqualified practitioners.

Forestry is a dynamic and demanding science, and those who practice it must be well trained and must keep their skills and knowledge up to date. Forester credentialing is the process of recognizing a forester's competence through standards of education, experience, and practice and through records of continuing education; it can also include demonstration of knowledge through examination.

Credentialing is accomplished through various mechanisms, from voluntary certification by a nongovernmental organization to mandatory licensing by a state licensing body. As of 2004, 16 states have implemented licensing or registration programs affecting who may provide forestry services to the public and the nature of the services they provide. Several other states are considering implementing forester licensing or registration statutes, but not without some degree of controversy regarding the role of credentialing within the state's professional regulatory framework, and the need, type, and specific requirements of different credentialing programs.

Background

Registration as a means of credentialing foresters is mandatory in Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina and voluntary in Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and West Virginia. It is not required of government foresters in Georgia or Arkansas, or corporate foresters in Georgia. In Arkansas and South Carolina, registration is not required of industrial foresters working on company lands. The credential-granting programs in these states enable state agencies to identify individuals who have met specific standards of professional education and/or experience deemed necessary to provide forestry services. The individual's qualifications may be determined by a review developed and administered by the state agency. Virginia has the least rigorous form of forester credential: Virginia statute defines the title "forester" as a profession but allows those without the title to provide forestry services.

Licensing as a means of credentialing foresters who provide services to the public is mandatory in Alabama, California, Connecticut, Maryland, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. There are exceptions to licensing mandates. For example, in New Hampshire, licensing is not required of government or corporate foresters, or of others unless they are offering services to private forest owners for compensation. Alabama has similar exemptions as do other states. These states vary in their procedures for granting individuals the right to offer forestry services through the issuance of licenses and the degree to which they enforce their licensing requirements.

Most states that require registration or licensing also require written testing. Only Maryland, Michigan, Oklahoma, and West Virginia do not require testing. States not mentioned above currently lack forester registration or licensure statutes.

SAF administers the Certified Forester® (CF) program, which can serve as a basis for state-sanctioned forester registration or licensing programs. Established in 1994, the SAF Certified Forester® program is a voluntary, nationwide certification process that grants the CF credential to foresters who meet the profession's academic and professional experience benchmarks, adhere to professional standards of practice, value continuing education, and pass a rigorous assessment of professional knowledge and skills. A primary component of the program is the requirement for 60 hours of continuing forestry education prior to each recertification (every three years). The CF credential is a standard of professional practice that benefits all foresters regardless of their employer affiliation, specific forestry discipline, or membership in the Society of American Foresters.

The forestry profession is not alone in requiring credentials at the state or national levels. Other professionals such as lawyers, engineers, surveyors, and physicians often have mandatory credentialing and continuing education requirements. These credentials provide a mechanism to protect the public from malpractice, as well as protect the profession from misrepresentation by non-qualified individuals.

Recommendations

Because of the wide range of forest types and environmental conditions in which foresters operate, and the variation in state laws and regulations that affect forest management practices, state governments are the appropriate authorities to require forester credentialing programs. The SAF Certified Forester® program represents an established credentialing program suitable for state adoption in implementing forester licensing or registration programs. The SAF CF program establishes and maintains proof of the professional competence needed to practice forestry. Its requirements and professional standards equal or exceed those of the several states that now have forester licensing and registration programs.

States that are developing such programs should review the SAF CF program and consider adapting its features to credential foresters in their jurisdictions. Such programs should include

provisions for reciprocity among states to enable individuals credentialed in one state to practice forestry in another state with equivalent credentialing requirements. States that adopt the CF program are encouraged to supplement it with state-specific knowledge and/or experience requirements to ensure foresters' familiarity with state and local forest practices laws, regulations, and conditions. In addition, to increase the benefits associated with forester credentialing, the SAF strongly recommends that state licensure statutes be applied consistently across all employment sectors, i.e., private consultants, public forestry agencies, and forest industry. To be fully effective in protecting the public interest, forester credentialing must be recognized by state statute so that the state can enforce the credential by prosecuting unauthorized practice by unqualified and unlicensed persons.

For Further Information

Mortimer, M. and D.H. Jenkins. 2003. Forests at the Fringe: Sustaining Private Forests by Avoiding Perverse Incentives. *Journal of Multistate Taxation and Incentives*. 12(10):28-37.

Society of American Foresters. 2001. SAF Task Force Report on Forester Registration and Licensing. Bethesda, MD. Available online at <http://www.safnet.org/policyandpress/LRCinfo.cfm> (accessed August 2004).

Society of American Foresters. 2004. *Certified Forester Program*. Available online at <http://www.safnet.org/certifiedforester/index.cfm> (accessed August 2004).

About the Society

The Society of American Foresters, with over 15,000 members, is the national organization that represents all segments of the forestry profession in the United States. It includes public and private practitioners, researchers, administrators, educators, and forestry students. The Society was established in 1900 by Gifford Pinchot and six other pioneer foresters.

The mission of the Society of American Foresters is to advance the science, education, technology, and practice of forestry; to enhance the competency of its members; to establish professional excellence; and to use the knowledge, skills, and conservation ethic of the profession to ensure the continued health and use of forest ecosystems and the present and future availability of forest resources to benefit society.

The Society is the accreditation authority for professional forestry education in the United States. The Society publishes the *Journal of Forestry*; the quarterlies, *Forest Science*, *Southern Journal of Applied Forestry*, *Northern Journal of Applied Forestry*, and *Western Journal of Applied Forestry*; *The Forestry Source*, and the annual *Proceedings* of the Society of American Foresters national convention.