

**SUSTAINING
PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY AND GROWTH
A REPORT
BY THE
COMPETENCY MAINTENANCE WORKING GROUP
TO THE OPFA MEMBERSHIP
APRIL 2008**

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Acknowledgement

While this report bears the name of the Working Group, its content reflects also, reasoned input and support from Council, information from other professions, considerable effort by OPFA staff and by particular members of the working group and most importantly, discussion by close to a quarter of the Membership in Ontario.

INTRODUCTION:

After the Annual General Meeting (AGM) 2006 and in view of a minority negative response to a resolution of the Continuing Education (CE) Committee recommending a next step, Council decided to step back and consider where such a next step was going to take us. Council established the Competency Maintenance Working Group to recommend a full program of Competence Maintenance.

The Group responded, not with the requested “realistic program”, but with a report that considered the law and Council’s due diligence requirements, drew on the actions of other regulators of professions to identify possible elements and recommended a strategy of member consultation. The Group’s report was posted on the website and has been periodically updated. Its content was described in newsletter articles, presented at the 2007 AGM, discussed at the Fall Seminars and remains available as background information.

The public should be able to expect that the regulatory body of the Professional Foresters will ensure that each of its members is and remains competent in his or her area of practice.

The Professional Foresters Act, 2000 states that *“the principal object of the Association is to regulate the practice of professional forestry and to govern its members in accordance with this act, the regulations and the by-laws in order that the public interest may be served and protected.”* To this end, the Act confers significant authority on the Council which *“may pass by-laws,*

“22. prescribing a quality assurance program and requiring members and employers of members to participate in and co-operate with the program;

“24. prescribing a continuing education program and requiring members and employers of members to participate in and co-operate with the program;”

This final report meets the initial mandate of the Group. It recommends a realistic program. In doing so, the Group has suggested an approach built upon suggestions from Members.

The Group recommends an approach that will:

- Focus on supporting Members in meeting their individual obligations;
- Combine Quality Assurance and Continuing Education authorities of Council;
- Offer a program that Members can choose to implement early;
- Implement as a formal required program in steps;
- Seek volunteers to “pilot” steps before making elements mandatory;
- Assess availability of suitable resources before making elements mandatory;
- Increase information for Members about such resources;
- Review and adjust the overall program based on learning at each step;
- Continue to consult and inform Members at each step

BACKGROUND:

The Ontario Professional Foresters Association (OPFA) currently has had for several years, a basic requirement for Continuing Education (CE) activity and reporting. This was recognized as an initial first step in sustaining the competency of the professional and is part of a larger framework of maintaining competencies in the profession.

In 2006, a number of Members objected to taking a next step: developing an audit protocol to review a sample of Members CE records. While the majority of Members supported the proposed move, Council realized that it was not clear where the “next step” was leading. What would a full program involve? They struck a Working Group to define a Quality Assurance Program.

In 2007, the committee conducted a survey of 9 professional associations regarding their competency programs.

They discovered that each association has or is considering a competency program, for its membership.

There were some common elements to most of these programs:

- Self-assessment
- Member responsibility to maintain professional competency and to only practice within competency
- Regulatory bodies typically require:
 - Reporting by members;
 - Credit based CE; and
 - A program of review.

Reviews usually covered CE and many covered application (practice).

Review might be by a colleague (Peer) selected by the Member and required to sign-off on the review, by a representative of the college (Association), or by a team or committee of members.

In some cases, Colleges require periodic recertification.

After much discussion the committee developed the first draft outline of what a Competency Maintenance Program might look like and a possible schedule of implementation. This was not a recommended program; rather, it was to serve as the basis for extensive consultation with members.

Their report to Council was in fact a discussion paper for member input entitled:

*“EMBRACING OUR FUTURE:
ENSURING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF MEMBERS OF THE
ONTARIO PROFESSIONAL FORESTRY ASSOCIATION”*

This paper outlines in detail the background and issues.

It has been updated and remains available on the OPFA website.

The draft was put on the agenda for each of the fall regional seminars for discussion. Discussion indicated that the concepts were generally accepted as meeting Council’s due diligence in meeting their responsibility to the public, but the details were not fully embraced. They were seen by a number of Members as potentially onerous, unproductive and/or bureaucratic. Most members feel that action is inevitable.

It is of interest that younger members seem more often to be more accepting of the ideas as logically needed.

Some Members expressed nervousness regarding defining a personal “scope of practice” as there could be legal implications of stepping outside one’s defined “scope” and might be “used against the Member” in a complaint. An equal number suggested that well documented scope and competence maintenance activity might serve the Member as “good defense material “in such cases.

The Group recognizes the concerns as legitimate, but the need to define our own program and move forward has, if anything increased.

The recent Health System Improvement Act, 2007 will require that the Quality Assurance (QA) program of each Health Profession College (e.g. College of Nurses, College of Physicians and Surgeons) shall include:

- (a) continuing education or professional development designed to
 - (i) promote continuing competence and quality improvement among the members,

- (ii) address changes in practice environments, and incorporate standards of practice, advances in technology, changes made to entry to practice competencies and other relevant issues in the discretion of Council;
- (b) self, peer and practice assessments and;
- (c) a mechanism for the College to monitor members' participation in, and compliance with, the QA program.

Among other issues raised by Members in the Seminars, the Group has noted:

- Significant differences in the knowledge resources and training activities available to those involved in Crown Land forest management and those practicing on private land;
- Job change involving relocation may involve a change in ecosystems being dealt with and thus significantly affect practice;
- Investment of time in staying current in matters of professionalism and ethics may not be as natural for Members as review of forest literature, yet are critical to professional status;
- Concern about the documentation standard required (e.g. "exactly what do I need to retain to verify my attendance at a particular workshop?");
- Interest on the part of the public (expressed by Public members of the OPFA Council, to have well rounded professionals, and thus to not have a program that promotes narrow areas of learning;
- Competence involves skill and application as well as knowledge;
- Some of the best learning occurs when one tries to actually apply new knowledge and/or technique with a reasonable level of supervision involved;
- Supervision of another Members' learning is itself a learning activity of significant value;
- Supervision in the sense required by the Act, implies technical oversight at a level sufficient for the supervising Member to professionally assess competence and quality of the work and need not be chain-of-command supervision;

- Involving employers, as contemplated and authorized in the Act, could raise employers' sensitivity when assigning work to members and considering support for their continuing education.

THE PROGRAM

The program is designed for Members who practice any Professional Forestry. Thus it would apply to Full, Associate and Non-Resident Members, and would not become mandatory for Life, Honourary, Inactive, Provisional or Student Members. However, with minimal adjustments, the program should be of value to Student and Provisional Members and would be recommended for any Inactive Members who may contemplate return to practicing status.

The Group recommends that the Program should become the responsibility of a new standing committee combining the responsibilities of the Working Group and the current CE Committee. Working sub-committees may prove useful. Council would retain authority to decide on each step and of making any elements mandatory. Implementation at each stage would typically involve a resolution for consideration by the Members.

OPFA should not impose a requirement for which it cannot identify existing resources reasonably available. This may mean that Council will need to undertake or facilitate provision of some resources.

Consultation with employers (or employer representatives) would precede any action to require their involvement.

While, as more than one Member said, full quality assurance does not occur until someone actually assesses how the Member applies their knowledge and skills.

The overall draft program is set out below, noting that it would be adjusted as experience grows with each element. The Group proposes a series of elements, to be phased in, with trial by volunteers at each step:

1. Each Member would record in writing, a Personal Practice Focus
 - a. Like the scope of practice description for Associate Members, this would describe both geography and functions covered;
 - b. The level of detail would reflect the Member's role and responsibilities in a form that would be understood by a reasonably knowledgeable reader;
 - c. As noted below, the Focus would encompass more than the technical knowledge needed for current activities.

2. Subsequently, the Member would consider what has changed in the knowledge, technology and approaches relevant to their focus. He or she would also consider what is changing or is likely to change in their set of responsibilities.

3. From this, each Member would record a brief action plan which could span up to three years, depending on the practice need and the available resources.

4. The Personal Practice Focus and related learning plans would be reviewed and confirmed or amended at least once in any three year period, but Members would also be encouraged to take these actions whenever a job, location or main assignment is changed.

5. An optional form would be developed to assist Member documentation:
 - a. It will allow identification of 4 areas:
 - i. Matters where the Member NEEDS current knowledge and skills, i.e. the area of their practice,
 - ii. Matters where the Member WANTS to develop or maintain knowledge and skill, i.e. areas for growth, career development, etc.
 - iii. Matters of General Awareness on forestry matters, not directly related to their practice,
 - iv. Professionalism & Ethics.

 - b. Guidelines (not standards) and examples of record keeping will be made available.

 - c. Records would be kept current and would be retained by the individual Member;
 - i. The Member would continue to be responsible for recording their CE activity;

- ii. While they need not use the optional form, they would record activity so that the four areas can be determined;
 - iii. Annual reporting of total CE activity would continue and the Member would be encouraged to report activity in the four areas;
 - iv. The Member would continue to be responsible to meet or exceed the defined minimum level of total CE activity averaged over three years,
 - v. In addition, the Member would confirm that the Member has undertaken any other steps required at the time.

 - d. Until a formal sample audit is introduced, Members would be asked to voluntarily submit documentation in return for informal advice (non-binding) by Members of the governing Committee (thus allowing the committee to monitor the program implementation and make adjustments.
6. New Candidates for Membership would be required to be Provisional Members and meet the experience requirement under observation of identified sponsors, noting that:
- a. Change of sponsors would be necessary in some cases as jobs change or Members move;
 - b. The Registration Committee would continue to have authority to recognize relevant out of province experience and/or graduate study for part of the required time.
 - c. Sponsors would be asked to voluntarily continue to mentor the new Member for a further two years.
7. Reporting of total time investment in Continuing Education would continue to be required, with current requirements adjusted as follows:
- a. No specific allocations among the four areas would be mandatory, but this would be re-assessed after sufficient data is collected;
 - b. CE activity would be reported in hours rather than CE credits, unless it becomes evident that different values should be placed upon different types of learning;

- c. Application of newly learned knowledge or skill would count as CE time , if under the supervision of another (qualified) Member;
 - d. Such supervision/mentorship would count as CE time;
 - e. The OPFA will seek out CE opportunities and sources, making the information available to Members, likely through the website.
8. “Auditing” of CE activity would be introduced on a sampling basis, focused on confirming that the Member has undertaken and documented required steps.
- a. While advice may be offered, no judgment of actual competence is contemplated.
9. Peer review of CE activity would occur at least every three years and at least once in each of a new Member’s first two years of practice;
- a. The member would select and make arrangements with a Peer with suitable knowledge;
 - b. Both parties would sign and seal a statement that the review had taken place and the peer reviewer would sign and seal to confirm that the reviewed Members activities met at least the minimum level required, the focus was clearly and appropriately defined and the plan and activity were appropriate to meet the need.
 - c. While advice may be offered, no judgment of competence is contemplated.
10. A practice review, with peer or part-time volunteers or staff would be the final step. As more than one Member identified, “until you see how a professional actually applies what they know, professional quality is not assured.
- The Group has not developed details of practice review, believing that this will be informed by experience with earlier steps and further consultation with Members would be needed.

NEXT STEP

The Group recommends that Members support Council's introduction of a next step:

- 1) Rather than moving next to CE audit, the next step would involve:
 - a) Documenting one's Personal Practice Focus, which would be recommended but voluntary in 2008, and mandatory by the end of 2009.
 - b) The optional document format, guide and examples would be available as soon as practical, but no later than the start of 2009.
 - c) Provisional membership and early identification of sponsors for new candidates would be recommended immediately and mandatory for new graduates after the 2009 AGM.
- 2) Action to improve Member information about CE opportunities would be given early attention.

Note that while not included in the action to be approved at the 2008 AGM, recording of planned and actual CE activity in the proposed four categories is implied.

CLOSING REMARKS:

It is the sincere hope of the committee that with the implementation of a viable Competence Maintenance Program in the next 5 years, each individual member will feel recognized and supported in meeting his/her responsibilities in professional growth and will further strengthen his/her practice, ensuring that the public is protected and well served.

COMPETENCY MAINTENANCE WORKING GROUP

Attending:

- David Balsillie, Honourary Member; Adjunct Professor, U of T Forestry
- Rod Carrow, Retired Dean of Forestry, Chair OPFA Complaints Committee
- John Cary, Forestry Consultant; A previous OPFA President
- Phil Davies, Conservation Authority Forester; Recent Associate Member
- Bob Elliott, Forestry Consultant; Member: Forestry Futures Committee
- Craig Howard, Forestry Consultant; OPFA Past President
- Caroline Mach, County Forester, Council Member
- Jim Parker, Management Consultant; Facilitator; Now Honourary Member
- Tony Jennings, Inactive Member; Registrar

Corresponding:

- Herb Bax, Northern Consultant
- Herman Ebbers, Industry Forester; Associate Member
- John Goodman, Retired; Past President
- Susan Jarvis, Forestry Consultant; Past Councillor
- Mona Wiltshire, Manager, Forestry Futures Trust; Council Member

Support:

- Judy Biggar (& Terry Bissett for first meeting)