NZIF: Professional body or forestry society?

Andrew McEwen[1]

There appears to be some misunderstanding of the membership structure presented at the NZIF AGM at Coffs Harbour as part of the NZIF Review. The NZIF is often described as a body for the professionals in New Zealand forestry. Examination of the characteristics of other professional bodies (surveyors, architects, lawyers, doctors, valuers, accountants, engineers, etc.) suggests that membership grades usually reflect a general progression through the professional life of the member. Common steps include:

- Student member - studying towards a tertiary qualification of relevance to the profession;
- Recent graduate - the member will usually be working under the guidance of more experienced professionals, gaining a range of professional experience and undertaking professional development courses. At the end of this period, the member is likely to be required to pass a professional qualification (such as accountancy professional or law professional). Employers will provide some form of job rotation to expose the graduate to a range of professional activities (which may be specified by the professional body);
- Professional - experience continues to grow but unsupervised work can be undertaken. Continuing professional development is required. In some bodies this step does not exist and graduate members progress directly to a registered member status;
- Registered (or chartered) - generally expected for all those practicing the profession. Entry at this stage will require passing an exam or other hurdles. Once registered, the member is able to work in an unsupervised capacity, but there could be extra hurdles if the member is offering services to the public (such as demonstrating knowledge of, and competency in, issues like contracts, competition law, consumer guarantees, etc.). The registered member will have to meet ongoing requirements for registration, hold a current practicing certificate, undertake ongoing professional development and agree to uphold the professional body's code of ethics and observe the standards and policies of the body. The member may be required to hold some form of professional indemnity insurance. There will be a robust disciplinary process for hearing complaints against a member from other members or from the public. If a complaint is upheld, appropriate penalties can be imposed.

Contrast this with the current NZIF structure:

- Student - studying towards a tertiary qualification of relevance to the profession;
- Associate member (also the category for those interested in forestry but with no appropriate qualification or experience and those not employed as forestry professionals). No requirement to gain appropriate work experience, no requirement for job supervision, no requirement for continuing professional development and no professional mentoring. This phase lasts for five years;
- Full member - admission requires a relevant qualification and a minimum of five years experience in some branch of forestry. There is no requirement for any professional exam or evaluation of the forestry knowledge of the applicant. Once admitted there are no ongoing requirements (apart from the annual subscription) including no requirement for continuing professional development;
- Registered - no expectation that a member will advance to this category. While registered members who provide consultancy services to the public must become registered forestry consultants, there is no requirement for a full member providing such services to be registered. Although a member cannot call themselves a forestry consultant or registered forestry consultant unless they are registered, there is nothing to stop full (or even associate) members from providing consultancy services and calling themselves a forestry adviser or forest manager (as some have). For those who are registered the requirements are similar to, but possibly to lesser standards than, the equivalent status in other professions (maintenance of registration, annual practicing certificate, continuing professional development, subject to disciplinary process if there are complaints, etc).

Members of the review team formed the view that if NZIF is to gain respect and function as a full professional body with the features commonly found in such bodies some changes are needed. The suggestions I presented at the AGM are a possible approach. They included:

- Introduction of a graduate category to cater for the period between graduation and eligibility for full membership;
- A requirement for continuing professional development for full (or professional) members;
- An expectation that most full members would seek and attain registered status.

Also suggested was:

- Retention of the associate category for people who are interested in forests and forestry and who want to

[1] *Registered Forestry Consultant, Wellington, NZIF Vice President and a member of the NZIF Review Working Party. This article is a revised version of a contribution to NZIF Newsletter 2007/31 (10 August 2007).*

support the objectives of NZIF but who do not operate as professionals in forestry;
- Corporate membership for companies and organisations that wish to support NZIF;
- Reciprocal membership for members of another relevant body (e.g. Farm Forestry, other professional bodies, etc.) who want to access some of the services provided by NZIF, but without the cost and obligations of full membership.

Other issues that were canvassed in the questionnaire, at the meetings with members and by members of the review team, and that need to be part of any new membership structure include:

- What should be the requirements for advancing from one category to another and for maintaining a membership category?
- Should NZIF develop a professional exam that could test the forestry knowledge and experience of members seeking to advance to a higher membership category?
- How do we ensure that continuing professional development opportunities are provided?
- Should graduate and full members be permitted to provide services to the public or operate as a consultant, unless under the supervision of a registered member?
- Should some membership categories be required to hold relevant professional indemnity insurance?
- Should there be a separate registered forestry consultant category or should we concentrate on the requirements for and promotion of the registered status for all forestry professionals, perhaps with some special requirements (through the Articles or the Code of Ethics) on those who provide services to the public?
- How do we promote the professional status of members to employers, statutory bodies and non-member forestry professionals?
- How do we ensure that NZIF becomes the organisation of choice for the wide range of professionals involved in present day forests and forestry - not just for those with a traditional forestry qualification?

If NZIF members are not in favour of the changes suggested above, then one has to question whether NZIF can regard itself as a professional organisation and expect the respect that the public has for professional people. Are we saying that forestry is somehow a different profession from others and that it does not need the sort of requirements and obligations that the public has come to expect from other professions? Or are we just trying to pretend that we are a profession when we are really a society for people who have some interest in forestry?

There has been comment that "only" 17% of NZIF members responded to the questionnaire as if this somehow invalidates the results. All members received the questionnaire and a number of reminders to complete it. Those who did not respond cannot claim that they did not know about it and we must assume that they were content to let other members form the direction in which NZIF should move over the next decade. I examined all 135 responses to the review questionnaire (including responses from 44% of all registered members). I presented and took part in five local section meetings (each taking over two hours) that were attended by about 80 NZIF members. The impression I gained was that a clear majority of those members who took the trouble to answer the questionnaire and/or to attend one of the local section meetings supported a move to make NZIF a more professional body, with the characteristics normally expected of such a body.

The proposal to strengthen the internal aspects of NZIF does not exclude NZIF from making a contribution to the wider community. Rather it enhances our ability to make that contribution and, by demonstrating that we take ourselves seriously as a profession our contribution will receive more respect from those who we seek to influence. Professionalism and contribution to the community are both needed.

NZIF announces Fellow

The New Zealand Institute of Forestry Inc (NZIF) made John Ruru a Fellow of the Institute at its recent AGM. In announcing the honour at the recent combined conference of the Institute of Foresters of Australia and the NZ Institute of Forestry at Coffs harbour, NZIF Vice President Andrew McEwen noted that being made a Fellow recognised John's leadership in forestry, particularly in developing Maori interest and involvement in forestry. His leadership includes in the areas of training, especially Maori youth, and providing advice on historical land administration and Maori land issues.

"John's nomination as a Fellow of the Institute recognises that he has achieved a level of eminence in the forestry profession widely recognised by his peers and that he has set high standards and provided leadership."

John has been active in the forestry industry for over 41 years, initially in the New Zealand Forest Service, then as a Regional Conservator for the Department of Conservation, and more recently as a Registered Forestry Consultant based in Gisborne.

In congratulating John, NZIF President Jacquetta (Ket) Ms Bradshaw also highlighted his contribution to the NZIF.

"John has been an active member of the NZIF in Westland and the East Coast, and his contribution to forestry has also been recognised by the Government who madeJohn a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2006 for his contribution to forestry."

For more Institute News, go to Page 47.