

NZIF expectations of Registered Members

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Introduction

The highest category of ordinary membership of the New Zealand Institute of Forestry (NZIF) (i.e. excluding Honorary Members) is Registered Member (RM), which includes Registered Forestry Consultant (RFC). Available since 1996, some 91 NZIF members are currently registered as RMs of whom 77 are RFCs. The NZIF strongly encourages members to seek registration. Registration is formal acknowledgement that successful applicants have met the standards of the profession. The registration process is also a mechanism for providing ongoing feedback on a member's performance.

This note records the professional obligations of RMs and outlines some of the measures that the Registration Board is currently developing in support of the registration process.

Background

The registration scheme was implemented in 1996 replacing a recognition scheme that had been operating since the late 1970s. The move to registration was for three main reasons – to lift the status of the scheme; to raise the level of professionalism of NZIF members, especially consultants; and to provide for the category of Registered Member in addition to Registered (Recognised) Forestry Consultant. In 1996 it was anticipated that the category of NZIF Full Member would eventually be replaced by Registered Member. This has not occurred to date but still remains a consideration for the NZIF Council.

Expectations of Registered Members

RMs are required to meet certain minimum requirements in order to maintain registration. These include agreeing to abide by the NZIF Code of Ethics, undertaking a minimum 20 hours of Continuing Professional Development (CPD i.e. structural learning) per annum, adhering to NZIF professional standards and guidelines – such as

the NZIF Forest Valuation Standards - and (currently) mandatory professional indemnity insurance for RFCs. A resolution will be put to the next NZIF AGM in April 2004 that is likely to see this latter requirement removed from the Articles of Association. Further comment is provided on this below.

When members apply for registration, and during five yearly reviews, they are also expected to supply the names of three referees of whom one must be at least a Full Member of the NZIF. Notification in the Journal, or other NZIF communication such as the newsletter, of an application or review is also part of the registration process and any NZIF member may provide comment to the Board. Applicants are also expected to provide at least three recent examples of forestry-related reports that they have written.

Complaints against an RM may be laid at any time by a NZIF member or member of the public. Provision for this is outlined in the Articles of Association and has been refined in more detail by the Board. In the last five years there have been two complaints lodged against RFCs by members of the public and investigated by the Board. Both complaints were found to be unsubstantiated. Currently the Board is involved in investigating concerns raised by a member of the public about a forestry investment prospectus, which includes a report by a RFC, which states that it meets the NZIF Forest Investment Standard.

The Board, itself, is not immune from queries about the integrity of its procedures and has instigated a formal investigation in at least one instance. This was, likewise, found to be unsubstantiated.

Support for Registered Members

Every year there is usually at least one candidate for registration who is invited to reapply at a later date. The Board is mindful of the fact that not all applicants will achieve the minimum standards first time around. Rather than discourage applicants, and aware of the fact that a number of NZIF members operate on their own, the Board's focus is on providing appropriate means for members to achieve, maintain and, indeed, exceed the required standards.

In 2002/03 the Board ran a number of CPD seminars to remind RMs of the requirements for registration and to help provide guidance on some of issues of concern to the Board, such as the standard of report writing. The Board is not anticipating repeating these seminars at this stage but the NZIF Council is arranging a structured



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CPD series of seminars on a range of topics such as forest valuation, taxation, modelling and so on.

The Board has also produced an abbreviated one-page Code of Ethics, which has now been distributed to all members. The abbreviated Code of Ethics is not designed to replace the fuller version but the Board felt that it was appropriate that a shorter, simpler version be more readily available to members. The 2002/03 CPD seminars spent a considerable amount of time outlining the requirements of the Code of Ethics.

The Board is in the process of providing more opportunities for feedback to RMs through the application and review process. RMs who have recently applied for registration will note that the interview panel provides direct feedback, if not the final outcome, at the end of the interview. The five-yearly review process is also used to provide general feedback through correspondence or directly through an interview. The Board is currently considering an option where a review applicant, rather than the Board, can initiate an interview if they would like direct feedback on their performance.

The 20 hours minimum CPD required by the NZIF is at the lower end of the scale compared with other professions and yet many RMs struggle to meet this provision. The Society of America Foresters and Canadian Institute of Foresters, for example, require their registered members to undertake 150 hours CPD during a three-year period. In response, the Board has spent a considerable amount of time refining what is meant by the term CPD and providing this information to RMs. The Board is preparing a new CPD form, which RMs use for their annual reporting on CPD, in which the requirements for CPD are more clearly defined.

Liability

An area of great concern to the Board has been the exposure of RMs to professional liability claims. As is outlined elsewhere in this Journal, we live in increasingly litigious times. There have been several instances in the past few years where forestry companies have been sued successfully over poor performance.

A belief that both consultants and the public should be insured against professional negligence was amongst the reasons why the NZIF initially adopted compulsory Professional Indemnity (PI) insurance for RFCs. There were also concerns that RFCs may not be sufficiently aware about liability issues, and possibly exposed as a result. The Board will, however, be recommending at the 2004 AGM that it no longer

be a mandatory requirement in the Articles of Association for RFCs to obtain PI insurance.

The reasons for this recommendation include acknowledgement that decisions about PI insurance are commercial decisions for RFCs to decide, rather than the NZIF. The Board is mindful that most other professional societies do not require mandatory PI insurance and that a survey of RFCs in 2001 was evenly divided on the issue. The huge increase in the cost of PI insurance recently has been another factor in the Board's decision-making process.

The Board still, however, strongly recommends that PI insurance be purchased by RFCs. Members may be interested to know that the Council, Board and officials of the NZIF (including local sections) are all covered by both public liability and PI insurance.

The Board is also taking steps to assist RFCs to minimise PI risks. These are:

- development of professional standards – such as the NZIF Forest Valuation Standards;
- CPD training - the 2002/03 seminars spent a considerable amount of time discussing liability issues;
- development of standard Terms of Engagement models (including disclaimers) – discussed elsewhere in this Journal.

Comment

Inasmuch as the NZIF registration process is still relatively new compared with other professions there is still a great deal of on-going activity by the Board to ensure that the necessary procedures and standards are in place to support this initiative. Even in these other professions there is still a great deal of activity to maintain and update the systems in place. The NZIF is fortunate that it is able to borrow from these professions to support its own processes.

The registration process in some professions is supported by legislation, whereas the NZIF process is voluntary. Nevertheless the standards that the NZIF has set for the registration process means that RMs, in particular RFCs, are increasingly being recognised for undergoing registration. However not all forestry consultants choose to be registered. The NZIF is promoting its RMs through a number of avenues and it is also important that RMs promote the fact that they are registered. The strength of the NZIF registration scheme will ultimately, however, depend on the ability of the NZIF to set and enforce appropriate standards and for RMs to maintain their adherence to these standards in turn.