

Professional association versus professional members

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A survey in 2007 showed a majority of NZIF members wanted the Institute to be more professional. The Council embarked on a programme of activity to achieve this. Accounting processes and reporting to members have been overhauled, a new membership database integrated with a new website has been introduced, new rules have been approved by members, and the NZIF office was moved to Wellington. Here it has a higher profile and is more accessible to members and others.

Alongside this, membership has been retained and expanded, with a record 880 members at 31 March 2012. The number of registered members stands at 95 after dropping to 73 in 2009, but is still short of the high of 106 in 2001. The *Journal of Forestry* continues to be produced each quarter and new publication processes have been implemented. The newsletter, started in 2003, continues to arrive every Friday. Successful annual conferences have taken place, with the last five all producing financial surpluses which have helped fund other NZIF activities and keep annual membership fees down. Submissions and representations continue to be made on diverse topics.

Aspects that need further work include –

- **More executive support** The elected councillors and officers are unpaid but undertake a significant workload on behalf of all members. This can make standing for Council unattractive to well-qualified but busy members. If we want the NZIF to continue to be governed by competent and experienced members and to expand its activities, we need more support for them, even if it means increasing fees to make this happen.
- **More registered members** Less than 20 per cent of eligible members are registered. This is low for an association that wants to be treated as a fully professional body, and more effort is needed to attract applicants for registration.
- **Expand membership** There are many forestry professionals who are not NZIF members. While the level of recruitment and retention in recent years is pleasing, we need to find ways to increase membership.
- **Develop policy positions so members and the public have a better understanding on where the NZIF stands on important issues** The NZIF national policy on forestry and indigenous forest policy statements both need revisiting. Council has an agreed position on genetic modification. But the lack of agreed guidance on many other issues means most submissions and representations are based on the views of the few members of Council and the wider membership who actively participate in that activity.
- **Assess need for standards** The NZIF has a standard for forest valuation, but not for other aspects of professional forestry. What standards need to be developed to guide professional forestry in New Zealand?
- **Programme for professional development** Most professional associations have formal programmes of workshops, training courses and web-based facilities to help professional development of members. The NZIF does poorly by comparison and we need to determine what should be provided for members and others, how to implement it, and how it should be funded.
- **Promote the economic, environmental and community benefits of forests and forestry to politicians, officials and the public** The government currently appears to lack any coherent view on forestry, focusing on some aspects such as climate change mitigation to the exclusion, and often detriment, of others. A comprehensive view of the role of forests and the barriers to further investment in them should benefit the country.

Over the last few years the Council has acted on the wishes of members and placed the governance and administration of the NZIF on a more professional basis. But does this make the membership itself more professional? It has improved the image of the NZIF, and indirectly, its members for those who come into contact with it. This should have some effect on the way members, or at least those who actively promote themselves as NZIF members, are viewed by employers and the public.

My doubts are about the image of the profession of forestry, especially compared with other professions and about the image that employers have of us. Most employers needing an accountant will look for a chartered accountant. Registered surveyors, architects and engineers are preferred to unregistered professionals.

So why is it that NZIF members do not see membership, and particularly the obligations that go with registration, as evidence of their professionalism and do not seek or use registration to promote themselves? Why do employers, especially those who are NZIF members, not find registered members in preference to unregistered members? Why do members not promote the registration scheme to others, including employers and the public? Until we undertake self-promotion, which to be effective must come from individual members and not some generic promotion by the Council, it is difficult to believe that we take our professionalism seriously and would like to be considered equal to other professionals.

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