



BCIA Committee on Principles of Stewardship

Report to Council

March 29, 2010

INTRODUCTION

The 62nd Annual Meeting of BCIA passed the following resolution.

Whereas one of the purposes of the Institute as defined in the Agrologists Act, is (a) to uphold and protect the public interest by (ii) upholding the principles of stewardship that are the foundation of agrology, and

Whereas there is little being done to achieve this purpose,

Therefore be it resolved that Council establish a committee of interested Agrologists to explore and propose the means by which BCIA and individual members can uphold and protect the public interest by upholding the principles of stewardship that are the foundation of agrology and report back to the 2010 AGM.

In response to the resolution, the BCIA council solicited volunteers from the membership, established a committee of 8 agrologists and created terms of reference that empowered the committee to develop a guiding framework to inform the Institute and individual members in their respective responsibilities as to how to uphold and protect the public interest through the principles of stewardship, which are the foundation of agrology. Such a framework is intended to provide direction for professional agrologists to understand how they can individually and collectively respond to diverse agricultural and food-related demands and issues in our province, while respecting the professional responsibilities entrusted to them to protect the public interest.

Agriculture and food production are essential for survival and so our professional responsibility is of critical importance to society. In the most general sense, it is clearly in the public interest to address the challenges of food production for our current and increasing population. This challenge can be compounded by such things as the impacts of global warming, desertification of global farmland, the urbanization of farmlands locally and globally, and the impact of peak oil on food production and transportation costs. The United Nations reports that land degradation affects one third of the planet's land surface and threatens the health and livelihoods of more than one billion people in over one hundred countries (United Nations, 2006) Within the next 45 years, there will be a staggering 30% reduction in farmland per capita in developing countries. British Columbia is at risk due to a significant dependence on other regions and countries to supply our food needs. As one of only a few registered professions in BC with expertise in agricultural and natural resource sciences, professional agrologists have a responsibility to the public to address the challenges facing agriculture both individually and collectively, and to contribute to the development of enhanced food security for present and future generations. A professional response to any agricultural or food issue requires an objective examination of the complex elements of the situation, leading to the development of appropriate and balanced conclusions. Additionally, agrologists working in forest or other non-agricultural land uses have a stewardship responsibility to ensure that critical resources are sustained and landscape functions are maintained. The public has a crucial stake in the competence, objectivity and ethical practice of professional agrologists, and rely on our profession for appropriate input and recommendations in the field of agrology.

Within this context, the BCIA Committee on Principles of Stewardship (the committee) has undertaken a review of the manner in which other professional organizations address the individual and collective responsibilities towards stewardship within their respective professions. This report summarizes our discussions of these issues, including recommendations to Council for their review prior to their presentation and discussion at the 2010 BCIA Annual General Meeting.

FUNDAMENTAL DEFINITIONS

Early in its deliberations the committee identified the need to clarify the meaning of two key phrases in the resolution, namely *“uphold and protect the public interest”* and *“the principles of stewardship that are the foundation of agrology”*, which were derived from the purpose of the Institute as stated in the *Agrologists Act*. In the committee’s opinion, providing agrologists with clearly stated definitions of “public interest” and “stewardship” is a fundamental component of addressing the intent of the resolution and will provide much needed direction for agrologists who desire to participate, individually or collectively, in public discussions and discourse on matters of personal or professional interest.

Public Interest

Public interest is a widely used term that most people generally accept without question until confronted with a situation where stakeholder perceptions of what is “in the public interest” conflict. For the purpose of our work, the committee debated whether public interest referred to the entire public interest at the provincial level (i.e. the interests of all British Columbians) or is restricted to public interest under the confines of the *Agrologists Act* (i.e. restricted to “agricultural” interests). A review of a number of discussion documents confirms the complexities and challenges associated with defining public interest. While nearly everyone claims that aiding the common well-being or general welfare is positive, there is little, if any, consensus on what exactly constitutes the public interest. The committee’s general view is that the public interest is a broad and inclusive term and provides the following draft definition for the consideration of BCIA members:

The "**public interest**" refers to the "common well-being" or "general welfare" in which the whole society has a stake and which warrants recognition, promotion, and protection by the government and its agencies. The public interest considers changing societal values of broader application and longer term perspective and is central to policy debates, politics, democracy and the nature of government itself. It is approximated by comparing expected gains and potential costs or losses associated with a decision, policy, program, or project.

Adapted from: Wikipedia, Stakes in the Ground.

Stewardship - A Working Definition for Agrologists

With regard to the practice of agrology, the term “stewardship” best refers to a level of holistic responsibility towards aquatic and terrestrial plants, animals, the land and its resources so they are managed in such a way that ensures the continued health and long term resilience of agro-ecological systems. The goal of agricultural stewardship is to sustain agro-ecological systems for present and future generations, while recognizing that agricultural practices inherently create changes in the natural environment. Other factors to consider include societal values, the rational application of science, the role of traditional knowledge, economic factors, and the impacts on the community at large.

Specific examples of stewardship, as it pertains to the practice of agrology, could include:

- Recognition of healthy soil as the basis of agriculture, through planning and practices that endeavour to preserve both quantity and quality.
- An understanding of the roles and values of agricultural ecosystems within the larger landscape.
- Determining a systems approach to land-use decisions that identifies potential impacts on water, energy, and nutrient cycles, aquatic and terrestrial plants, animals and other land users.
- The conservation of resources so that optimum efficiency of energy is achieved over the long term and reliance on non-renewable resources is minimized.
- Recognition of the importance of biodiversity and ecological complexity within the agricultural system.
- Caring for the health of the land for cultural reasons, to ensure that a productive land-base is sustained and the intrinsic value of agro-ecosystems is recognized.

As a professional agrologist, being an effective steward requires upholding the principles of professional practice by maintaining integrity, credibility, and following appropriate due diligence in accordance with the *Agrologists Act*, bylaws and Code of Ethics.

Adapted from: BCIA Code of Ethics; Land Stewardship Resource Centre; Association of BC Forest Professionals.

RIGHTS, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Over the past several years the Institute has been engaged in an internal debate regarding the rights and responsibilities of agrologists and the Institute to participate in public policy decisions and “advocate” a particular position. Advocacy is generally defined as:

Advocacy by an individual or by an advocacy group normally aims to influence public-policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions; it may be motivated from moral, ethical or faith principles or simply to protect an asset of interest. Advocacy can include many activities that a person or organization undertakes including media campaigns, public speaking, commissioning and publishing research or polls or the 'filing of friend of the court briefs'.

In essence, the purpose of the committee is to propose the framework or “rules of engagement” under which individual members and/or the Institute can participate publicly while respecting the *Agrologists Act*.

1) Individual Members

In determining the rights and responsibilities of individual agrologists, the committee explored the underlying legislation that governs our conduct. This included a review of our basic individual rights and freedoms as citizens as confirmed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and our obligations under the *Agrologists Act*.

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms:

As Canadian citizens or residents of Canada, agrologists’ rights to speak on public issues are guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The guarantee is as follows:

Guarantee of Rights and Freedoms

Rights and freedoms in Canada

1. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

Fundamental Freedoms

Fundamental freedoms

2. Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

- (a) freedom of conscience and religion;
- (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;
- (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and
- (d) freedom of association.

Agrologists Act

As individual agrologists we are governed by the *Agrologists Act*, the bylaws authorized under the Act, and our Code of Ethics, which states “*All members of the institute, however and wherever they may practice, are bound by the code of ethics set out by the institute and shall, as a condition of membership in the institute, assent to and conform to the code of ethics.*”

It is the Code of Ethics that provides members with broad, general interpretations of the Act. Specific sections of the code that provide guidance in relation to the obligations of individual members to the public include:

1. a) to practice only in those fields where the Agrologists' training, ability and experience make them professionally qualified.

1. b) to express a professional opinion only when it is founded on adequate knowledge and experience, and where Agrologists have an understanding of the situation and context against which the opinion is being offered.

1. d) to extend public knowledge of agriculture and natural science and to promote truthful and accurate statements on sustainable agricultural and natural resource systems and environmental matters.

Specific sections of the code that provide guidance in relation to the responsibility of individual members to uphold the principles of stewardship that are the foundation of agrology include:

1. c) to undertake stewardship of sound scientific principles in the practice of agrology within agricultural and natural ecosystems.

2. d) to inform the client or employer of any action planned or undertaken by the client or employer that Agrologists' believe is detrimental to good stewardship or in breach of known laws or regulations.

Nothing in the *Agrologists Act*, bylaws and/or Code of Ethics supersedes an agrologist's rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Nevertheless, by virtue of our status as professionals registered under the *Agrologists Act*, additional considerations may apply to our participation in public processes. We are directed in 1. d) of our Code of Ethics "**to extend public knowledge of agriculture and natural science and to promote truthful and accurate statements on sustainable agricultural and natural resource systems and environmental matters.**" Therefore, it is likely that agrologists will participate in public debate on a wide range of public issues, some of which may be closely related to their area of professional expertise, some not at all and some in which the agrologist is expert in a part of the issue. The agrologist's ethical responsibilities in all instances include the following:

- Agrologists should be honest and clear about whether their opinions are founded on their professional expertise (e.g. soil science or agricultural economics) or whether they are expressing an opinion as an informed and interested citizen with no or minimal claim to subject matter expertise or specialized knowledge. At all times, agrologists must be cognizant of their areas of expertise and refrain from making statements that

could mislead the public regarding their qualifications. *Professional opinion should only be expressed when it is founded on adequate knowledge and experience, and when the Agrologist has an understanding of the situation and context against which the opinion is being offered.* (1. c, Code of Ethics).

- Agrologists should clearly separate scientifically verified “fact” versus opinion. Opinion may have to be justified, but can be based on non-scientific criteria or values such as spirituality, community values, life experience or observation.
- Agrologists should be clear that they are speaking on their own behalf as individuals and not representing the BCIA or other members.
- Agrologists should not confuse the role of providing others with information upon which to base a decision with the role of being responsible for making the decision itself.
- *“Agrologists should attempt to correct misleading or erroneous statements on agricultural or natural resource issues whenever and wherever such statements are encountered”*, (1. d., Code of Ethics) even if they are attributed to a fellow agrologist.
- Agrologists should avoid injury to fellow agrologists even though there may be disagreement on an issue. Agrologists should be able to disagree, debate, or challenge the position of other agrologists and non-agrologists in a respectful manner that does not harm, but maintains the reputation and credibility of the Institute.
- Agrologists should become informed on and engaged in matters of stewardship and public interest as part of their professional development obligations. This will assist members in meeting their professional development responsibilities as monitored under the BCIA audit process; including maintenance of current knowledge of relevant areas of agrology.

2) Institute (BCIA)

While it may not be appropriate for the Institute to play an active role in advocacy based on the current interpretation of our Act (Reader, 2006), there are a number of roles the Institute can and should fulfill:

- Professional accreditation and ongoing evaluation of member credentials, including audits of professional development records. As an organization it is the BCIA’s responsibility to ensure that members are making appropriate use of the available science and operating within their area of expertise when required to deliver a professional opinion. This can only be accomplished through rigorous and demonstrable licensing, accreditation and professional development auditing processes.

- Establishment of “topic specific” adhoc issues committees to increase awareness of the science relevant to a particular decision or issue (as opposed to taking a position on a decision or issue). Agrologists need to be informed in all the relevant aspects of critical issues of agriculture and natural resources that fall under our responsibilities prior to engaging the public. This approach provides an opportunity to inform and engage fellow agrologists in the process of learning about important issues and deciding how to include the public in the discussion. Committees would involve members with expertise specific to the issue and potentially other resource professionals depending on the subject matter.
- Facilitation of forums, green/white papers, public meetings, seminars, etc. using a science-based approach. These activities could be facilitated by the issues committee established to study the particular issue under discussion. The focus should be on providing a balanced scientific view on any given topic, with the intent of educating members and informing the public. The Alberta Institute of Agrologists has commissioned a number of discussion papers and in each instance had issued a disclaimer statement to the effect that the information presented does not necessarily represent the views of the Institute or individual members.
- Development and delivery of professional development (PD) activities to assist members in improving their ability to participate effectively and responsibly in public processes. Examples may include dealing with the media, technical writing skills, proper documentation and record keeping, and handling ethical dilemmas (i.e. case studies as per ethics courses).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee provides the following recommendations for council’s consideration. It should be noted that the recommendations are based upon the existing legal interpretations of the current *Agrologists Act*. If BCIA members are of the opinion that the Institute itself should be able to take positions on agricultural issues and make those opinions public, then it is possible that the Act itself would need to be reviewed in order to ensure that the Institute's roles and responsibilities are ascribed accordingly. The recommendations are presented in order of priority and the committee believes there is a sense of urgency for the Institute to address those recommendations (1, 2 and 3) that involve the clarification of roles and definitions.

1. Pending review and approval of the roles the committee has identified for individuals and the Institute, the Institute should develop and distribute a guidance document that summarizes the criteria and protocol for individual agrologist and Institute involvement in public processes. The Advocacy Policy developed by the Association of Professional Biologists of British Columbia provides a meaningful framework for such a document given the similarities between the Agrologists and Biologists Acts.

2. The committee believes it is necessary for the BCIA to clarify certain statements in the Code of Ethics pertaining to stewardship, which was part of our rationale for drafting a broad definition for the term in the context of agrologists' role as professionals. Section 1 c) of the Code of Ethics states *"undertake stewardship of sound scientific principles in the practice of agrology..."* What precisely does this statement mean in relation to the agrologists' role as professionals? How does a member "steward" sound scientific principles? The discussion paragraph that follows this statement in section 1. c) of the code outlines a range of other variables (monetary, social values, community impacts, etc.) that agrologists must consider in decision-making processes. Some of these factors are qualitative in nature and involve individual judgement rather than science-based evaluation. Is it not the agrologists' role to apply (rather than promote) sound scientific principles in delivering a professional opinion on only those elements of a particular situation that are within the purview of their expertise? The current wording seems to suggest a broader role.

Section 2 d) of the code implies a general responsibility to *"good stewardship"* that is not restricted to the *"principles of stewardship that are the foundation of agrology"*. Is this the intent of this statement and if so, it appears contradictory or at least confusing in relation to other sections of the code. In the committee's view, this statement supports the need for a broader definition of stewardship. Otherwise, members can fairly ask: how can we claim to *"uphold the principles of stewardship that are the foundation of agrology"* and/or ethically inform the client or employer of any action we *"believe is detrimental to good stewardship"* without defining what the term means?

3. Create the terms of reference for the formation and function of adhoc issues committees. As stated above, the purpose of such committees would be to increase awareness of the science relevant to a particular decision or issue as opposed to taking a position on a decision or issue. Committees could produce balanced, science-based discussion papers for both internal and external distribution, in an effort to meet the Institute's obligation to *"extend public knowledge of agriculture and natural science and to promote truthful and accurate statements on sustainable agricultural and natural resource systems and environmental matters"*.
4. Explore the implications of forming a separate association for functions other than registration, licensing, PD audits, practice reviews, etc. This model is used by the biologists, so there is information that the Institute could access in order to study this approach. Should the formation of such an organization be determined to be feasible and desirable, the Institute's role would be to ensure that where members are involved, their participation meets acceptable professional standards under the Act, bylaws and Code of Ethics.
5. Review the structure and content of current articling agrologist and ethics workshops to ensure issues related to advocacy and public engagement are adequately covered. The Institute should embrace and encourage these types of discussions amongst members in order to further the mutual understanding of the practical implications of the *Agrologists Act*, bylaws and code of ethics.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is important for any member of a civil society to be prepared to engage in matters of public interest. Agrologists have a particular professional competency to contribute to the discussion of some of these issues. As individuals we are at liberty to develop our positions/opinions incorporating the range of information available to us, including the science. As an organization, the BCIA has a responsibility to ensure that members are making appropriate use of the available science and operating within their area of expertise when required to deliver a professional opinion. The more challenging situations arise when (as members of society) an agrologist may wish to participate in public debate on an issue that may be “agricultural” in nature, but not necessarily within their area of professional expertise. It is in these situations where the Institute has a responsibility to provide guidance to members and/or to operate in a manner that does not infringe on the basic charter rights of members to participate in the discussion of important social issues.

Respectfully submitted by the BCIA Committee on Principles of Stewardship.

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