

Options to promote responsible forestry: codes of ethics, certification, and licensure.

PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL OF PROFESSIONAL FORESTERS

Our proposal:

increase forester responsibility
by amending the state law that currently provides for the regulation and licensure
of the professions of engineering, land surveying, and geology
to include the profession of forestry.

Are foresters in Pennsylvania currently guided by any codes of ethics or standards of practice?

While certain professional and industry organizations have developed guidelines for foresters and the practices that constitute “good forestry” are widely recognized, they are not mandatory for foresters practicing in Pennsylvania. The consumer of forestry services in Pennsylvania has no assurance that the individual they hire to provide forestry services possesses the necessary knowledge, experience, and judgment to render the highest quality service or that the individual is acting in an ethical manner.

Has a nongovernmental certification program been established to assist the public in identifying qualified practitioners?

Nongovernmental certification programs for foresters do exist, but participation in them by Pennsylvania’s foresters is not mandatory.

For example, the Society of American Foresters (SAF) administers a national *Certified Forester*[®] (SAF CF) program, which includes continuing forestry education prior to initial certification and each recertification thereafter. As good as its program is, however, the SAF believes “the CF program may supplement or complement state programs to certify, register, or license foresters; however, it is not a substitute for such programs.” (Information at the SAF website: <http://www.safnet.org/certified/cfprogram.htm>).

In addition the SAF CF program is only available to those foresters possessing a Bachelor of Science, or higher, degree in Forestry received from a forestry school accredited by the SAF or proof of equivalent training. There are many individuals practicing forestry in Pennsylvania with less than a four year degree. Certification programs generally lack the ability to protect landowners from the provision of less than satisfactory service. In the event that a *Certified Forester*[®] lost his or her certification they could still continue to practice forestry even if they had inflicted grievous harm as a result of their practice. Historically, Pennsylvania landowners have paid little attention to the credentials of individuals providing forestry services.

There are other programs that promote proper forest management — such as the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and the Tree Farm Program — but they are strictly voluntary. In addition, because of the unique nature of Pennsylvania’s forests, these national programs may not fully meet the needs of forestry in the Commonwealth.

Licensure of foresters will ensure that individuals practicing forestry in Pennsylvania have met appropriate educational and experience requirements. More importantly, licensure will hold individuals who practice forestry to high standards of performance. Those who do not meet these standards could be subject to a range of sanctions, including losing their right to practice forestry in the Commonwealth.

What are the relative merits of certification versus licensure (why is licensure the most appropriate method of protecting the public interest)?

It is likely that the best foresters will avail themselves of certification. However, because certification is a voluntary process, anyone could pass for a “forester.” Consumers of forestry services would have no sure way of knowing that an individual they retain possesses the knowledge, experience, or judgment to properly carry out desired services or that they will act in an ethical manner. Because it is a mandatory process required of all individuals who wish to practice forestry, licensure would provide consumers of forestry services greater assurance that the individual they retain will do the job in a professional and ethical manner.

Does a process exist in Pennsylvania to handle complaints about foresters’ services and to resolve disputes?

No such process currently exists in Pennsylvania, other than the civil legal system.

Could the use of applicable Pennsylvania laws, regulations, or standards be used to resolve issues related to foresters’ services?

No existing Pennsylvania laws, regulations, or standards regulate the practice of forestry in the Commonwealth. As a result, issues or disputes that are related to foresters’ services currently must be resolved using the civil legal system. This can be a long, expensive, and daunting prospect for the individual landowner. While compensation may be provided for damages, the damage to the landowner’s property and environment normally cannot be reversed. Because the stakes in such disputes normally go well beyond money, it would be best if the appropriate standards of forestry practice were followed initially.

In addition, no process currently exists in Pennsylvania to bar future work by individuals who have been proven to engage in unprofessional, inappropriate, fraudulent, or environmentally damaging practices.

Has the proposal to regulate the profession of forestry in Pennsylvania been studied by any independent body?

Yes. During the late 1990s, the Legislative Forestry Task Force studied the merits of forester licensure and other issues related to the management of the Commonwealth’s forests. The 1999 report of the Task Force concluded that further discussions on licensure take place within the forest products industry because of the lack of unanimity within the industry on this issue.

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The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired.
THEODORE ROOSEVELT, 1910.