

The NZ Institute of Forestry Code of Ethics

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During the later part of 2002 and early 2003 the NZ Institute of Forestry conducted a number of Continuing Professional Development seminars for its membership, with the seminars being held in five central locations around the country. The seminars were targeted at lifting the professional performance of members, and they were well attended with more than 75% of Registered Members and a significant number of others (including a few who were hoping to become members) participating.

The first part of the programme was, appropriately, devoted to consideration of the Institute's Code of Ethics. The appropriateness stems from the fact that while all members are bound by the Code of Ethics in practice few are entirely familiar with, or regularly refer to it in the course of their business.

1. Background to the Code of Ethics;

The term Code of Ethics embraces two somewhat complementary and overlapping ideas, viz:

Code – A body of laws or rules so arranged as to avoid any inconsistency, a set of rules on any subject, the prevailing standard of a ...group.

Ethics – moral principles of a community or group, honourable, ..decent. (Concise Oxford Dictionary definitions).

The term "code" is often used on its own to refer to the rules of conduct of particular groups of people or parts of a community, or to delimit the conduct of certain activities (codes of practice); it is usually written (but not always, e.g. even criminals claim to have a "code"). The important feature in each case is that the code is binding and that it is consistent.

The introduction of the term "ethics" implies a level of morality, decency and honour that is usually wider than the specific interest of the group adopting the code, and which is at the higher end of the wider community's expectations of personal behaviour.

Professional groups, societies and organisations almost always have a Code of Ethics that is formally recognised by their constitutions, quite strictly applied and enforceable in law. This Code of Ethics will reflect the culture or attitude of the community of which they are part so, inevitably, a Code of Ethics of a professional group in one country or community may be different from that of a similar professional body in another place or culture, and will also vary from

profession to profession.

Some of the reasons for having a Code of Ethics:

- It sets the performance standard for members.
- It tells the community the level of performance able to be expected.
- It tells aspiring members what will be expected of them.
- It enables comparison with others (not members) offering similar services.
- It enables some assessment of the quality of performance.
- It can be a basis for disciplinary action.
- Overall it is fundamental to professional status.

2. Constitutional Implications

Like many other professional organisations, the NZ Institute of Forestry is required by its constitution to have a Code of Ethics, although the Code of Ethics is not part of the constitution and can be amended by the membership to reflect changing practices, laws and regulations and community attitudes from time to time.

The present Code of Ethics was approved in May 2001. As noted above, the Code of Ethics **binds all members**.

Right from the outset the Constitution of the Institute gives prominence to the performance of members; the Objects of the Organisation providing for the:

1. recognition of professional standards; and
2. oversight of member's ethics.

Elsewhere there are other references to the Code of Ethics that emphasise the organisation's ethical intentions; for example there is provision for **termination** of Membership upon transgression and particular emphasis on adherence **amongst Registered Members**.

Taken together these points establish **quite clearly and up front that the NZIF is an organisation committed to a high standard of performance and prepared to enforce this amongst its membership**.

3. The Code of Ethics

The NZIF Code of Ethics focuses on the professional performance of members in several key respects including their professional responsibility, responsibility to clients, fee policy, conflict of interest and so on – the key elements of which are outlined in a little more detail below:

Professional Responsibility

Maintenance of the highest standards of integrity and courtesy to clients and colleagues,

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and loyalty to the Institute is mandatory – while technical and factual accuracy is emphasised. The provision of any unconsidered information, views or gossip in situations where the recipient is likely to ascribe some professional credibility to it is not permitted.

Responsibility to clients

Loyalty and confidentiality is to be provided to all clients and, in any situation where a conflict of interest could arise, disclosure and the client's acceptance in writing is required. This provision extends to situations where work is required which is outside the member's usual area of practice or capability.

Professional fees

Fees are required to be appropriate for the work being undertaken, open to scrutiny and the only source of remuneration for a particular job; in particular payments for reporting a predetermined result are not permitted.

Professional work by members in employment

Members are required to be loyal to their employers, to the extent of not working for any other party without the employer's consent.

Professional competency

Members are required to maintain their competency in their area of practice (Registered Members are required to complete CPD every year).

Use of member's name and designation

Members should always identify their role in any reports provided in their professional capacity and accept full responsibility accordingly, and must avoid bringing the Institute into disrepute.

Advertising and promotion

Member's advertising of their services must be accurate, should not involve the Institute unless express permission has been given to do so, and remains the responsibility of the member.

4. Member's adherence to the Code of Ethics

The NZIF Council has rarely received complaints about the ethical performance of its members; those complaints it has received almost always focusing on technical issues. Nevertheless we live in an increasingly litigious society and Council deems it important member's performance is as good as possible. In this regard the Registration Board has reported that on occasion applicants have shown quite modest knowledge of the content or purpose of the Code

of Ethics.

Council has therefore determined that all members should be reminded of the existence the Institute's Code of Ethics, the key contents and members' obligations to perform according to this code

The reminder takes the form of a laminated A4 card which can be carried in a member's diary or vehicle glove box, or pinned to their office wall, and which sets out the principal elements of our Code of Ethics. Titled the "Abbreviated Code of Ethics", the card is being distributed to all members and will also be provided to all new members as a matter of course. The expectation is that this will help ensure all members remain aware of their obligations to perform according to this code and that they have it in a form which allows quick and easy reference. The abbreviated code is not the complete document and Council still expects that, where issues of interpretation arise, the complete document will be referred to.

The on-going maintenance of ethical standards by the Institute's members ensures the wider community receives a reliable, competent and consistent service. It does not mean the answer will always be the same as there is often more than one way to address an issue – and it is often the ability to identify the options, the quality of the service provided and the delivery itself which will distinguish businesses from one another.

Overall, while the Institute has taken a firm view of members' observance of its Code of Ethics this has not stifled the ability of businesses to compete or express their individuality but it has helped the wider community by:

1. Providing clearly identifiable performance standards.
2. Providing a sound basis for judging performance.
3. Identifying the NZIF as a professional organisation.