

Speaking as a Professional *Journal of Forestry*, Vol. 91, No. 7, July 1993

One certainty these days is that public policy will continue to shape the future of forestry. We foresters seem to take what's served up, wishing we had more influence in the ingredients and how they are prepared. We need to assert more leadership in providing forestry knowledge to citizens and decisionmakers. However, information delivery is not enough; we need to be involved in the process of policy as well as its content. Technical information and good science will not prevail on their own. We don't have to push a particular option to be effective. We can use our skills and enthusiasm to present a perspective, a process, or the issue itself.

Our technical skills and science are important, but we must interpret them to the public and decisionmakers. If we don't do a good job of providing "knowledge services," citizens and decisionmakers will develop judgments without us, and perhaps without the necessary technical or scientific information. Here are some tips for making the most of our communication efforts.

Understand the issues. Today's forestry issues are numerous, complex, and difficult for even the most astute individual. Read professional publications, talk to specialists, attend seminars, take field tours. Seek out a variety of perspectives, even if you don't agree with them.

Realize how opinions are shaped. Be aware of how the media portrays and the public perceives the issues. How do policymakers and decisionmakers find out the facts? What opportunities exist for helping various groups better understand the issues?

Know your listeners. What is their background? Do they understand forestry concepts and jargon? Do they represent an organization? Where do they stand on forestry issues? What questions might they ask?

Describe yourself. Give your name and any groups that you belong to or represent. Call attention to

training or experience that relates to the issue at hand. Don't apologize for not having a PhD or for not being a senior executive.

State your concern for natural resources. Foresters nearly always have a strong and compelling interest in sound stewardship of natural resources. When dealing with contentious issues, this concern may not be readily apparent and then your message may be less effective.

Be specific. Detail brings life to written or spoken comments. Illustrate your points with examples, statistics, photos, drawings, and maps.

Have a clear purpose and strategy. If you agree with something you have seen or heard, voice your support and offer examples or ideas that provide confirmation. If you disagree, carefully assemble a case to substantiate your points.

Be calm. Let your story tell itself. Don't fire random emotional shots at individuals, institutions, or interest groups. Don't deny your emotions; rather, direct them toward collecting and articulating the facts that support your views.

Don't blame. You weaken your message by blaming individuals, society, institutions, or interest groups for problems related to forestry. Concentrate on flaws in concepts or arguments, not people or organizations; then suggest positive ways to improve the situation.

Offer a perspective. Don't be shy even if you are not a journalist, scientist, or upper-level manager. Your thoughts about an issue are no less valid, and your experience with on-the-ground forest management may be impressive.

Focus on the facts, but identify opinions and values. As a professional you should focus on providing accurate and useful facts. Your informed opinion also can be important as long as it is clearly distinguished from established fact. Current forestry issues also encompass a wide range of personal or organizational values. You should

identify your values if they shape your interpretation.

Raise questions. Even if you are not an expert in biology or economics, it is important to raise questions about key information gaps or poorly supported arguments. And if it appears that opinions are mixed with facts or that values are shaping how information is used or interpreted, ask for clarification.

Be brief. Whoever your audience is, time and attention may be short. Your objectives are to deliver a compact bundle of facts and views and to be remembered in a positive way. Organize your material and write it out ahead of time. When speaking, allow time to answer questions.

Practice. When preparing oral remarks, write them just as you expect to say them. Practice aloud. Think through questions you might be asked and rehearse your responses. If you are reluctant to speak up verbally, send a carefully written letter or commentary.

Follow up. Provide a written copy of your remarks or other material supporting your points. Note any questions that you did not answer well and provide a more complete response in a follow-up letter. Let people know if you are available to discuss the issue further. Ask people for candid feedback.

Keep at it. Forestry issues are not resolved overnight. New issues will emerge and old ones will be revisited. Use these as opportunities to develop your knowledge, skills, and potential influence as a professional. Remember: no one can listen if you don't speak up!

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As an SAF Member...

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By Paul W. Adams

SAF members and leaders have many opportunities to speak to the broader public about important forestry issues, either directly or indirectly. These situations include public meetings, newspaper guest columns, letters to the editor, and occasionally interviews by journalists who report on such issues. As SAF members we also have the responsibility to use these opportunities “to challenge and correct untrue statements about forestry” (SAF Code of Ethics) that, unfortunately, have become all too common.

With our increasingly urban population, it’s especially important that the thoughtful comments of experienced SAF professionals are more widely seen and heard. In Oregon’s most urban county (Multnomah), for example, support for Measure 64 (1998’s “anti-clearcutting” measure) was 68 percent higher than the statewide average. While many factors played a role, a lack of visibility of the professional forestry perspective among urbanites probably contributed to this result. Given our relatively small numbers, the profession needs more active and articulate voices to speak to the public.

But what can I say?

When speaking or writing for the public, SAF members may wonder if and when it’s appropriate to speak on behalf of the profession or the SAF. This is more than a rhetorical question because the SAF Code of Ethics specifically directs its members “to indicate on whose behalf any public statements are made.” And unless you explicitly say otherwise, stating your professional title or employer affiliation will be seen by some as effectively serving as a spokesperson for that organization or professional group.

Thus, the safest approach is to make it very clear who you are and aren’t speaking for. This includes the SAF, which only in some limited and unique circumstances uses an official spokesperson or develops a formal view on a specific forestry issue. Among the latter are national, state and local SAF position statements that are adopted according to SAF guidelines (www.safnet.org/policyandpress/policyprocess.cfm). A key requirement of this process is a two-thirds affirmative vote of the executive committee of the SAF unit that develops the position.

Of course, even locally developed SAF position statements won’t fit each specific forestry issue that’s discussed or debated in the news media or other public setting. And it’s not practical for SAF executive committees to convene and vote on every major forestry issue that emerges. In such instances, it may still be helpful to quote or cite a more generic position to support your views. An SAF leader or member also can qualify a public statement by saying “although SAF hasn’t adopted a formal position on this issue, as a forestry professional I am concerned about...”

How should I say it?

Two words: Be professional. Some years ago I co-authored a short piece for the *Journal of Forestry* (July 1993) called “Speaking as a Professional,” which offers some basic guidelines about speaking up in public about forestry issues. The article is printed on pages 14-15. Tips include doing your homework, knowing the audience, limiting jargon, staying calm, avoiding blame, and identifying key facts and values. Most readers or listeners will respond much more favorably to a clear, constructive, and fact-based (i.e., professional) argument than one that promotes confusion, blame or hearsay.

Unfortunately, the same guidelines for speaking as a professional or on behalf of an organization like SAF won’t always attract the spotlight of the news media. Journalism today is heavily focused on the engaging issues that involve controversy and conflict, versus the more positive views that forestry professionals have to offer. And all too often, the quest for journalistic clarity and balance ignores the professional voice that says “it depends” or “it’s complicated” in favor of the colorful quotes of those with highly polarized views.

But the situation isn’t hopeless—you simply need to understand and connect with the audience, i.e., the journalist and the people he or she is writing for. Think of analogies or concepts that they can relate to: thinning or weeding a carrot patch, the fire triangle, restoring (versus mugging!) the burn victim, etc. Offer a personal experience or other unique perspective—not only can an individual (versus an institutional) view bring an issue to life, it can also help show the value of field work and professional experience when dealing with complex forest environments.

A personal example

Last summer I was invited to testify at a Congressional field hearing on post-fire restoration. Among my objectives was to call attention to the views of Oregon SAF and many forestry professionals that I know personally. Below are some statements from my written testimony that I hope help illustrate some of the principles outlined in this article. Keep in mind that these principles can apply similarly to a simple phone conversation with a newspaper reporter as well as in this very formal setting.

“Although I will not be speaking specifically on behalf of [OSU or SAF] my experience with them clearly has helped shape my perspective. I should also point out that...our family has a second home...in Camp Sherman...Thus, I speak from a technical, professional and personal perspective.”

“As an extension educator and active member of the SAF, I have come to know dozens of professional foresters...[who] are frustrated by...very limited results out on the ground. This frustration is shared widely...and provided incentive for recent position statements on salvage harvesting as well as the broader problem of forest health on federal lands.”

In addition to citing the OSAF positions in my written statement, I included hard copies as attachments to my testimony. And because of their direct relevance and quality in concisely describing the issues, I found the positions a useful timesaver as I organized my talking points and wrote my testimony.

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