

"As an SAF member..."

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. These tips included 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

Recently 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 paper. Keep in mind that these principles can apply similarly to a simple phone conversation with a newspaper reporter as well as this very formal setting.

"Although I will not be speaking specifically on behalf of [OSU or SAF], my experience with them clearly has helped shaped 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 (OSAF 2003a,b)."

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 time-saver as I organized my talking points and wrote my testimony.

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