

How Has the Rewritten Code of Ethics Held Up?

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In 2000, SAF members approved by referendum a complete rewrite of the SAF Code of Ethics, which, other than the 1992 adoption of the so-called land ethic (Canon 1), was the first substantive change to the code since 1948. The Ethics Committee that developed the new code cited several reasons for change:

- About half of the canons in the old code were ambiguous, redundant, too specific, or unnecessary.
- The old code lacked a clear statement of those values that distinguish forestry as a profession and drive ethical behavior.
- The language of the old code was legalistic and disjointed.

The committee felt that with a complete revision, “... we had an opportunity to clarify the meaning and intent of the code, to explicitly state the core beliefs of the profession, and to create a more inspirational document” (Radcliffe 2000). The old code consisted of a Preamble and 16 Canons; the current code consists of a Preamble and six “Principles and Pledges.” In both cases, the Preamble is considered an integral part of the code.

Compared with the high-energy debate over adoption of the land ethic, the proposed revision in 2000 received relatively little opposition from members. Although the new pledges covered the same areas of behavior as the old canons, there was some concern that the pledges would not be as enforceable. In the preamble of the old code, there was explicit reference to “[P]rocedures for processing charges of violation of these canons ...” In the current code, there is reference to the purpose of “governing members” and promises to “uphold and abide by” the pledges but no mention of charging members with violations. Canon 16 of the old code required members with evidence of violation of the canons to bring charges to the Council (now Board of Directors). That canon was dropped in 2000.

The decidedly softer language of the current code with respect to prosecution of violations might have been at the heart of concerns about enforceability. By contrast, the Code of Ethics of the [Association of Consulting Foresters \(2018\)](#) identifies and prohibits very specific

unethical practices. Such specificity can be found in the codes of other professions as well.

At a higher level, some believed that the new code favored human welfare at the expense of forest welfare (Cornett 2000). The clearest example was in the opening sentence of the two preambles, where “Stewardship of the land is the cornerstone of the forestry profession” was replaced with “Service to society is the cornerstone of any profession.” This was in a sense a re-opening of the land ethic debate, and it seemed like the membership at the time felt “let’s not go there again.”

In the 1985–2000 period, the activity and discussion surrounding the SAF Code of Ethics were at a fever pitch. Some of this activity was driven by the land ethic and the 2000 rewrite proposals, but those proposals also were a direct reaction to member interest in improving the code. In the following 18 years, there have been just six articles about ethics in the *Journal of Forestry*, and none relate specifically to the Code of Ethics. The practice of periodically printing the Code of Ethics and the procedures for bringing ethics charges seem to have gone by the wayside. Anecdotally, there also seems to have been a significant drop in ethics programs at state society meetings.

The perceived drop in energy level around ethics in SAF comes at a time when, in the broad society, ethics have become daily headlines. Not surprisingly, the headlines tend to focus on political and entertainment figures, but there have been some troubling reports in the forestry space:

- “SEC shuts down \$85 million alleged timber rights ponzi scheme and obtains asset freeze” ([The DI Wire 2018](#))
- “US Forest Service chief resigns amid sexual misconduct allegations” ([National Public Radio 2018](#))
- “Rayonier not out of the woods on timber-harvesting claims” ([Courthouse News Service 2017](#))
- “The National Park Service has a big sexual harassment problem” ([The Atlantic 2016](#))
- “Forest Service slammed over sexual-harassment and civil rights complaints” ([Washington Post 2016](#))
- “Cal Fire to pay \$30m for ‘egregious and reprehensible conduct’” ([Sacramento Bee 2014](#))

It is hard to find language in the Code of Ethics that very directly addresses the behaviors described in these cases. One almost must resort to the “looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck” reasoning. Is that a problem, or does it provide flexibility as times change?

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With respect to the matters behind these headlines there have not been any SAF ethics charges. Some of these headlines relate to unproven allegations, so there may not have been any violations of the code, or at least not by an SAF member. But in this charged atmosphere, it seems odd that in the past 5 years, there has been only one case referred to the Ethics Committee, and the committee did not find reason to refer it to the Board of Directors (Danielle Watson, pers. comm., Society of American Foresters, July 20, 2018). This is similar to the level of ethics committee activity in the 1950s and 1960s, but in the 1970s through 1990s, 23 cases were brought before the committee (Banzhaf 2000).

It is tempting to infer that there simply is less unethical behavior in forestry than in other professions, although the headlines imply otherwise. Other professions appear to have much more active ethics enforcement processes. At one extreme, in 2017 the American Institute of CPAs opened more than 500 cases of ethics code violations (American Institute of CPAs 2018). Perhaps closer to home as a science-based profession, the engineering profession reported on 12 ethics code cases in 2017 (National Society of Professional Engineers 2018a). Where a profession is state-regulated, such as real estate appraisal, state boards regularly find ethics violations. In Wisconsin alone, there were five disciplinary actions on Certified General Appraisers in 2017 (Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services 2018). Numerous states have forester registration programs with disciplinary processes, and it is possible that potential SAF ethics cases are being litigated through these state regulatory processes.

It is hard not to conclude that the topic of professional ethics and the membership's participation in the ethics process have moved to the outer edge of SAF's radar screen. Is this the fault of the 2000 Code of Ethics, or is the entire ethics system in need of a tune-up? Perhaps both are partly to blame, but the latter is easier to fix in the short term. Here are some recommendations:

- The Ethics Committee should file an annual report, to be printed in the *Journal of Forestry* or the *The Forestry Source*, detailing the number and types

of cases heard. If the cases result in disciplinary action, the names of those disciplined should also be published. The Code of Ethics and procedures for bringing charges should be printed in the same issue.

- There is a need for better information management related to ethics cases. In researching this article, it was discovered that there is no central repository for case files, and no systematic accounting of cases.
- Ethics workshops should be regularly offered at state society meetings. However, a prerequisite will be developing a pool of talent to lead such efforts.
- SAF has periodically published ethics guides that contain case studies and other useful information. The most recent, however, was published in 2004 (Society of American Foresters 2004). This work should be updated continuously and made available on the SAF website. The National Society of Professional Engineers (2018b) offers an excellent example of an exhaustive online ethics resource.
- The Code of Ethics is a mechanism for governing member behavior, but it is also a public statement of the ethical values we expect in professional foresters. The unfortunate headlines cited above present opportunities for SAF to speak out against unethical behavior regardless of whether a specific member is charged with violation of the code. Like SAF statements on forest policy, a statement on sexual harassment (for example) could be a powerful means of energizing ethics discussions within the profession.

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