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Public Issues Education in Natural Resources: SPEAKING AS A PROFESSIONAL

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Public Issues Education in Natural Resources

SPEAKING AS A PROFESSIONAL¹

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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 on 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 Ph.D. 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.

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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!