

Certification Benefits AFS Members Working in the Private Sector

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In May 2011, the Membership Concerns Committee distributed a survey to the American Fisheries Society (AFS) membership to gauge interest in and benefits of professional certification. The committee delivered its report to the governing board and a full article for publication in *Fisheries* is pending, but one highlight of this survey that the committee desired to report specifically was the perceived value provided to certified members working in the private sector. The survey was sent to 875 certified members, and we received 338 responses (34% response rate), 21% of whom reported working in the private sector, such as consulting.

Although personal satisfaction was commonly ranked the highest motivating factor to seek certification and a realized benefit after having received certification, those in private employment tended to rank perceived expertise by the public and by peers as the primary motivating factor for seeking certification. These respondents also perceived greater benefits from having professional certification than those in other employment categories (e.g., federal or state government). Those in private employment who responded to open-ended questions to clarify why they sought certification often stated perceived expertise or credibility by clients as important motivating factors. When asked whether these members planned to renew their certification (or, for associates, seek certified status), 79% responded they would, with reasons such as "prestige" or "importance when testifying in public meetings."

When AFS revamped its professional certification program, it sought to depart from the era where certification was "just another plaque on the wall" (McMullin 1997). It is gratifying, then, to discover that the AFS certification program has some tangible benefits. A survey conducted after the new certification program was put into place did not specifically analyze results according to employment sector, but it did suggest that certification could provide credibility when testifying at legal hearings (Pegg et al. 1999). As determined through our survey more than 10 years later, it is for those employed in the private sector that these benefits of credibility appear to be most realized.


In private industry, professional certification can play several roles. In professions such as engineering or accounting, certification implies that one not only possesses the requisite education but also has acquired a level of experience commensurate with a standard for that profession. Both industry and their customers view fisheries professionals in much the same way and can require the validation of credibility that certification affords as a condition of employment or a requirement to bid on or obtain a project. Though AFS currently has no official stamp or seal associated with professional certification for use by certified individuals, in other professions work plans or products may not be considered complete until they are reviewed and stamped by a certified professional. For example, a development project might include engineering drawings stamped by a design engineer, erosion and sediment control plans stamped by an environmental/civil engineer, and a plan for avoidance of protected species or riparian buffers stamped by a certified wetlands scientist.

Certification can also be a criterion for employment. Recruiting or human resource departments in industry often use professional certification as a cursory filter whereby a candidate's application is not even forwarded to the hiring manager unless some level of professional certification is shown. In other instances, companies may require new hires to achieve certification as a condition of employment, to satisfy a probationary appointment period, or as a part of one's ongoing training and development. Certification can also affect the pay grade at which an employee is hired and that employee's ability to advance to higher pay grades in the future.

The need for a certified workforce from an industrial perspective is significant. Hiring and maintaining certified professionals increases credibility for both the individual and the organization. Because the certification process is built around professional activity and scientific involvement, an employer can be assured that its certified professionals are being exposed to the latest innovations in the field, networking with a diverse group of other professionals, and carrying the industry or company's brand with them. As a result, certified professionals are considered to be more in tune with technology and the fisheries industry, more committed to continued learning and

personal development, and better billboards for their respective companies or organizations than those without certification credentials. In a legal proceeding, professional certification is used as an indicator of an individual's level of expertise as recognized by the society and his or her peers. Additionally, it is common that requests for bids on fisheries-related projects are only sent to individuals with professional certification, and consideration is only given to proposals from highly credible sources as denoted by certification.

REFERENCES

- McMullin, S. L. 1997. The American Fisheries Society: "certifiably" more professional. *Fisheries* 22(8):10.
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