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Earlier this year, the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE) appointed a Task Force on Specialization/Certification to prepare a discussion paper for the CCPE board in response to an apparent trend in several provinces and among other professions. Manifested as an increasing demand by government and industry for certifications over and above professional licensure, the trend is actually the public's growing need to be assured of professional qualifications and competence.

As we heard at the provincial roundtable at our AGM, this trend seems to have taken hold first in British Columbia, where the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C. (APEGBC) certifies four practice specialties relating to building codes compliance, structural engineering, contaminated site assessment and remediation, and building envelopes. As we learned, these programs are all the result of government saying it needs greater assurance of qualification for particular practices within the practice of engineering than that offered by the P.Eng.—despite APEGBC's assertions that professional licensing should be enough. Reasons cited for needing this assurance ranged from evidence of inadequate practice to the view that professionals who sign certificates of compliance for contaminated site clean up must possess demonstrated expertise because of the legal significance of the signed document.

In Ontario, we're seeing the trend in government proposals that building officials, contractors, architects and professional engineers be certified for their knowledge of the building code. Government staff have also asked PEO how specialists in design and inspection of water treatment and sewage facilities can

Specializing in trust

be identified, and special certification of professional engineers issuing hoist and conveyance certificates for mine shafts has also been considered.

In the wider arena, the public's call for assurance of qualifications and accountability can be seen in the establishment of recent licensing legislation in Ontario for geoscientists and for professional foresters. Meanwhile, the professions of law and medicine, which have long been licensed in Ontario, have also offered specialty certifications in certain areas for some time.

Nationally, the Canadian Council for Human Resources in the Environment Industry has established the Canadian Environmental Certifications Approvals Board (CECAB) as an autonomous board to administer a voluntary certification program leading to a Canadian Certified Environmental Practitioner (CCEP) designation. According to CECAB, industry needs the CCEP designation because the environmental sector comprises scientists, engineers, educators and other professionals whose existing credentials give no indication of their ability to solve environmental problems.

Our response?

How should PEO respond to what appears to be a declining willingness by the public to take professionals' abilities in all areas of their practice at face value? We could resist the notion of certifying practice specialties. But when the public is asking no more than that we demonstrate qualifications we claim to possess already, can this stance be credibly maintained? After all, section 72(2)(h) of Regulation 941/90 says that if we undertake work we're "not competent to perform by virtue of [our] training and experience," it's professional misconduct. This means that if we can't demonstrate our qualifications for the work we do, we shouldn't be doing that work anyway. Isn't the public entitled to ask at least this much of us in exchange for our privilege of self regulation? And if at the end of all our efforts, the public, industry and government remain unsure of our capabilities in *their* areas of concern, the government will simply impose on us whatever extra assurances it feels necessary—and we'll have lost significant authority over engineering and good will in the opposition process.

To my mind, working in partnership with government must surely be a better response, so that when government expresses a desire to attach a set of qualifications to a particular area of engineering practice, we define the qualifications to be attached.

A partnership approach

In fact, this is exactly the approach PEO is taking to provisions in the *Brownfields Statute Law Amendment Act* that would require a "qualified person" (QP) to sign the record of site condition (RSC) for contaminated site assessment and remediation. In a proposal submitted jointly with the Association of Professional Geoscientists of Ontario, we have suggested that the responsibilities and accountability that arise from signing an RSC require that a QP be a provincially licensed professional. Further, we have offered to develop jointly a regime, using the existing powers and mandates of the *Professional Engineers Act* and the *Professional Geoscientists Act*, to identify and qualify professional engineers and/or professional geoscientists as QPs. Such a regime, we say, will ensure an appropriate level of performance and accountability from QPs, including a clear, transparent mechanism for complaints and enforcement, and a consistent level of qualification and accountability over the two professional Acts.

Our proposal also sets out as guiding principles that the means of demonstrating and measuring the qualifications of QPs must be fair, clear, credible and transparent, and that the roles and responsibilities of QPs must be clear and well understood. To date, the environment ministry has not yet responded formally to our submission, but I am confident that we will at least be ensured continuing—and welcomed—input as the legislation progresses.

Enhancing value

I believe the profession need only feel threatened by the trend toward certification of practice specialties if we're unwilling to play an active role in establishing them where we're told they're needed. For each time we can identify to the public, in response to its concerns, the competencies of licensed professional engineers, so also will we have enhanced the relevance and the value of our licence. ♦