

The Future of Professional Societies

I attended two meetings on this topic hosted by Canadian Agri-Food Research Council (CARC) as a representative of the CSAS; one was held on November 15, 2003, and one on April 24, 2004.

1. November 15, 2003:

The meeting drew participation from 13 organisations in the agriculture and food sector, including the Agricultural Institute of Canada (AIC). The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the feedback on a draft plan for the creation of an umbrella organisation to represent scientific societies involved in the agri-food sector. The consensus from most of the societies was that they were not willing to wholeheartedly support the formation of a new umbrella organisation, especially given the fact that AIC is currently in the process of restructuring. Many society representatives mentioned that their boards had favoured a “wait-and-see” attitude with regard to AIC’s restructuring, because they thought that a “new and improved” AIC might be able to fit the bill as an umbrella organisation for agri-food societies. An exception was the Canadian Institute of Food Science and Technology (CIFST), which was willing to go ahead.

During an open discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- **Services:** Many of the societies were interested in finding out what enhanced services AIC could offer, especially if offering these services to a larger critical mass could reduce the cost for all concerned. AIC may look at providing more services and support related to conference planning, which is an area of difficulty for many organisations that rely on volunteers.
- **Communication:** Many of the organisations saw the need to improve communication to government policy-makers, to the general public and to the media. All agreed that it is important to improve communication among themselves, and AIC made some suggestions as to how it could facilitate that communication. **One opportunity that we should take advantage of is their offer to post meetings and events on their web calendar <http://www.aic.ca/whatsnew/calendar.html>.**
- **Issue Papers:** The Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) model in the USA was discussed. This organisation produces issue papers that are highly respected and widely consulted. It was suggested that many of the Canadian agri-food societies could partner to produce issues papers on topics of importance to Canada. Representatives from AIC and CARC will gather information on.
- **Joint Annual Meetings:** There was interest from some societies to hold joint meetings, or concurrent meetings. Some of the challenges mentioned to holding such joint meetings included: need for agreements regarding sharing of costs, risks, and surpluses; need for outside help in planning and organising large meetings; and need for coordination between societies to avoid duplication of efforts or overlapping of meeting dates. Also, a number of the societies meet with their American counterparts on a regular basis.
- **Leadership:** Most of the societies want to remain independent, but they are willing to let AIC take some leadership with regard to taking action on next steps.

2. April 24, 2004

- **AIC Presentation**

- Dennis McKnight presented the highlights of the AIC AGM, including an update on its restructuring. Even though in future AIC memberships will be on an individual basis, scientific societies can still contract AIC to provide services. Certain “core services” could be packaged by AIC.
- The professional societies may want to take a unified approach in asking AIC to provide services. Possible areas of service provision include: Annual meeting organisation, and journal and website management.
- Another possibility discussed was seeking collaboration between AIC and other umbrella organisations, such as the Canadian Federation of Biological Societies, to provide a package of services. CFBS offers services such as a secure webserver, on-line services, bookkeeping, and conference management
- It was decided that the Executive Directors of CFBS and AIC would meet and discuss the advantages of working.

- **Identification of Hot Button Issues**

- A facilitated discussion identified some common themes for hot-button issues: Food Safety (BSE - public perception); Organic Agriculture; Phytosanitary standards (harmonization globally - non-tariff barriers); GMOs; Trade with the USA (agriculture bio-security - scientist input is needed and policy); Dietary intake/healthy living vis-à-vis obesity; Nutraceuticals/functional foods; Regulation of chemicals/ environment/ pesticides/ antimicrobial resistance; Climate Change (impact and adaptation/ GHG emissions); Media reporting (balanced reports are lacking, misinformation reported); Decline in the number of scientists in Canada; Politicians not using science or deciding on very little scientific fact/ policy-making without science; Bio-diversity; “Slow food” (sustainable, small farms locally produced) versus “factory farming”; Balance between “policy driven research” and “science driven policy”
- These topics can be used for: discussion papers; themes for meetings; joint journal publications

- **Next steps**

- Societies should ask for a ranking of hot button issues and solicit volunteers for taking the lead on a particular topic. CARC Secretariat will add the professional societies to its mailing list for the “Areas Requiring Priority Consideration”.
- The Executive Directors of AIC and CFBS will meet and report back to members on coordination of service provision
- AIC will take the leadership of this initiative and CARC will bow out.

The next meeting will likely be December 4, 2004. Members are welcome to provide feedback to me or the new President, Duane McCartney before this date.

Respectfully submitted,
Shannon Scott