

# College Response to the BC Business Magazine Article on Environmental Assessments

**A** **S THE EXECUTIVE** Director of the College of Applied Biology, I was very interested in Anne Casselman’s article “*Watching the Detectives*” (BC Business, July 2015) since its focus is on the BC environmental assessment (EA) process and the role of professional biologists in moving development projects through the regulatory process. Ms. Casselman points out that as capital investment in BC’s natural resource sector grows, the role of EA has become critical to a project’s viability.

Her main assertion is that the self-regulating, self-reporting model of EA –i.e., professional reliance– compromises the environment and the public interest for the sake of “the almighty dollar.” I disagree with such a broad, sweeping indictment of professional reliance but I agree that there are some improvements to be made. Under professional reliance, governments have delegated responsibility for certain aspects of the regulatory process, including some decision-making, to registered professionals who are employed by industry or a development project’s proponents.

Ms. Casselman’s critique of the professional reliance model with regards to EA is similar to other analyses of the Riparian Areas Regulation<sup>1</sup>, forest management<sup>2</sup> and environmental regulation<sup>3</sup> –among others. Common issues highlighted are that (i) individual professionals working for industry, a proponent, or developer are challenged to balance their employer’s/client’s interests with their obligations to their profession and with public expectations, often times placing them in a difficult position with a perceived vested interest; (ii) while professionals are expected to adhere to their codes of ethics and areas of expertise when providing advice, the resulting decision is still discretionary for the client or employer; and, (iii) the registered professional can consider the client or employer’s interests and provide reasonable advice, but it is the client or employer who has the authority to decide how to proceed.

Within all of this discussion is the fact that reliance on professionals does not supplant the responsibility of government to ensure objectives are clear and practices are in the public interest. A higher level of transparency by professionals, proponents/clients, employers and government is required if the public is to be confident in the professional reliance approach<sup>4</sup>. The College of Applied Biology has an important role to play as the self-governing, regulatory body for applied biology professionals. Our primary mandate is to protect the public interest through ensuring the integrity, objectivity, and expertise of our members through a number of mechanisms such as audit and practice reviews, discipline investigations, a *Code of Ethics*, and requiring members to maintain their knowledge and expertise through continuing professional development. The College’s *Code of Ethics* requires members to report any illegal or unethical practices they observe or are pressured into. Members are also required to report to the College any unethical practices by other members, as this reflects poorly on all College members. The College is fulfilling its role in safeguarding the public interest by ensuring our members are ethical and accountable professionals. 

Pierre Iachetti, PAg, RPP, MCIP  
Executive Director

<sup>1</sup> The Office of the Ombudsperson of BC: “*Striking a Balance: The Challenges of using a professional reliance model in environmental protection – British Columbia’s Riparian Areas Regulation*” March 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Forest Practices Board. Board Bulletin, Volume 14, *Professional Reliance in BC Forests: Is it really the issue?* June 2013.

<sup>3</sup> University of Victoria, *Environmental Law Centre Report: Professional Reliance and Environmental Regulation in British Columbia*. 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Forest Practices Board. Board Bulletin, Volume 14, *Professional Reliance in BC Forests: Is it really the issue?* June 2013.