

2015 Conference: Lessons from the Science & Policy Panel

AS MEMBERS OF the College of Applied Biology, Registered Professional Biologists and Registered Biology Technologists provide unbiased scientific advice in the study and management of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. In short, members practice sound science! Our mandate to act in the public interest requires the provision of scientific information that is “technically accurate, policy-relevant, and politically unbiased” in the words of Dr. Bob Lackey, Professor of Fisheries Science at Oregon State University, who delivered a keynote address at the 2015 Conference. The interface of science, policy advocacy and decision-making often requires applied biologists to “walk the line” between competing influences.

The panel of RPBios — Susan Pinkus, Brian Clark, Jeff Green, and Chris Addison — provided perspectives on their experiences in response to questions from College President, Dr. Vanessa Craig. She asked the panel if they had ever engaged in policy advocacy and how they managed that while retaining their scientific integrity. Jeff responded, “Every time I provide advice I believe I also am doing some advocacy.” Susan contributed, “Policy advocacy is interpreting policy from a science perspective. Be sure you really understand what your objective is and what your assumptions are. Look for data that don’t support the position you are coming from. Your peers exist to catch you in your mistakes.” Brian suggested that, “If there is no policy, it’s the biologist’s responsibility to act – take it; it can lead to establishment of good policy!”

Next the panel was asked to consider how they might know they have crossed the line into providing biased information or perspectives. Susan’s advice was to start with the scientific method and *Principles of Stewardship*: “it’s hard to cross the line without knowing it” if you attend to these precepts. She also advocated listening to the people that do not agree with you, and trying to stay in a place between curiosity and courage. Jeff offered a number of questions he uses as a self-check:

- > Have I considered the widest range of issues?
- > Have I justified my decisions?
- > Have I consulted enough?
- > Do they understand the differences in my opinion and theirs?

He also pointed out that members are bound by the *Code of Ethics* and this can sometimes result in an uneven playing field. Chris advised, “Are you doing what someone told you to do and are you sure they know what the impacts of the action are?” He suggested two warning flags to attend to if you are near the line: it doesn’t feel right and the answer comes too easily. Brian’s advice, “Do the right thing. If you are too cautious, you are apathetic, if you step over the line, fess up. We all share the reputation!”

Vanessa asked, “How do you differentiate between what is acceptable in your personal life versus your professional life” and the panel responded loud and clear! Jeff declared, “I am a professional biologist 24/7. Have the courage to stand up and speak out about things that are wrong. Be clear about the difference between science and emotional reactions.” Susan supported this saying,

“Do the right thing, question your assumptions, check it out. We influence how the public thinks about science by what we do and say. The College must support this.”

Brian pointed out that being a professional biologist does not mean you give up your human rights. Chris challenged the audience to “raise the profile of what you do - challenge misinformation!”

It is safe to say that there was no lack of passion from the panel as they responded to the questions and each other, affirmed their commitment as professionals and their pride in being College members. Vanessa brought the discussion to conclusion by reminding all that the College cannot be an advocate but can continue to support members in promoting the value of independent science-based decisions. Above all, she challenged all members to identify themselves as College members by using the appropriate titles, and by using the logo. 