

AN UPDATE ON THE CUTS TO GOVERNMENT SCIENTIFIC PROFESSIONALS

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BC's Union for Professionals



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Overview

The Professional Employees Association (PEA) is a labour union in BC that was formed in 1974 to represent licensed professionals employed in the BC Public Service. Since then, the PEA has expanded to support a range of professionals across ten chapters in education, legal, union, and health care sectors.

The Government Licensed Professionals (GLP) chapter includes engineers, foresters, psychologists, geoscientists, veterinarians, agrologists, and pharmacists. These licensed professionals advise the government and provide regulatory guidance while keeping the province connected with technical best practices, conducting critical research, and providing services to safeguard a healthy public, environment, and economy.

However, while the provincial population has grown 26% over the past two decades (2000-2019), there has been a 16% decline in GLP members within the public sector. To review how this erosion of professional oversight was impacting the delivery of government services, the PEA sought an independent evaluation from Evidence for Democracy (E4D), Canada's leading science advocacy non-profit. After surveying GLP members, E4D released its 2017 report, [*Oversight at Risk*](#), which demonstrated the negative systematic impacts of downsizing professional oversight across the provincial government.

In 2020, E4D again surveyed GLP members in order to gauge the progress made by the provincial government since 2017. The new report, [*Spotlight on Integrity*](#), showed that although some progress has been made and the majority of GLP members (79%) believe their ministry has a clear mandate, 49% lack the capacity to adequately fulfill them. The report also showed the need for improved hiring practices and investment in resources to fill outstanding vacancies, while also increasing technical and support staff. Other priorities were also highlighted: the need for career laddering options to support the development of expertise, competitive wages for recruitment and retention, meaningful professional development, and strategic succession planning and knowledge transfer.

Specific opportunities exist to support the province's foundational principals, which are outlined in the mandate letters:

- Protecting clean water and the creation of a watershed security strategy will require support from agrologists, geoscientists and other licensed professionals. Development of a climate preparedness and adaptation strategy will require a diversity of licensed professionals working together.
- Successfully updating forest policy and legislation, and implementing land use planning will require adequate support and consultation from licensed BC foresters and many other professionals.
- Expanding active networks of transportation, modernizing the passenger-directed transportation industry, and developing an integrated transportation and development strategy will require support from licensed professional engineers.
- BC was created in 1858 to facilitate lawful gold mining and the extractive mineral, coal and petroleum industry has been a cornerstone of provincial prosperity ever since. Professional geoscientists are increasingly relied upon to produce baseline data and policy for evaluation of new extractive proposals, to minimize environmental impacts of extraction, and to aid in new discovery of metals that will be needed for a low-carbon future and fighting climate change.

Recommendations

Licensed professionals play a crucial role in ensuring that BC has sufficient capacity for research and evidence-informed decision-making. Today's society is technologically-driven and science-based decisions in governance are more impactful than ever before. Reliance on professional science will continue to grow and the GLP members who deliver that science need to be supported in the following ways:

- Improving hiring practices by providing competitive wages and investing in resources to fill outstanding vacancies. Conducting a staffing analysis of GLP members to determine where increasing technical and support staff will result in improved delivery of government mandates.
- Investing in career-laddering to support the development of expertise, recruitment, retention, mentoring, succession planning, and training the workforce of tomorrow.
- Supporting continuing education and professional development to ensure that research and policy implementation are consistent with professional best practice and the *Professional Governance Act*.
- Creating explicit scientific integrity and transparency policies such as those instituted at the federal level.

Lessons from the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic show that a foundation of science is essential when addressing and responding to such global crises. BC has demonstrated leadership by making science-based decisions with positive outcomes and enhanced public confidence in elected officials. However, the pandemic may be just a primer for the coming climate change crisis if the predictions of our best models are realized.

Licensed professionals work to protect the people, resources, and economy of the province. The BC government can support this work by building a system that values and enables the contributions of GLP members, allowing them to further enrich and safeguard the lives of British Columbians, better manage our natural resources, and tackle future global crises.