

Thoughts on FPS Strategic Planning  
TMcLain 4/11/10,

I have been thinking about FPS strategic planning and use this message to think more out loud and to share some random thoughts. This is unpolished and a bit random, but hopefully readable.

FPS is a member-based organization that seeks to provide information, networking opportunities and knowledge transfer. That suggests we should look at both membership and mission pieces in trying to decipher our future.

### **Membership:**

The membership stats indicate that the number of active members has declined over 65% in 20 years or so. Same thing is true for corporate members. I suspect that the ratio of industry to education members has declined as well. So, if we are to remain a membership-based organization then we need to:

1. Understand to core reasons of that decline in our historic base, assess likely future trends and determine options for altering those and probability for success in doing so,

(I speculate that the Executive Board does not have the knowledge or understanding to bypass this step—and that we will need some objective evidence to guide our planning. For example, it may be that the FP industry will continue to contract and that most of what is left will be either technologically unsophisticated and not in need of FPS, or very sophisticated and have their needs met elsewhere)

2. Identify potential future membership groups and objectively assess what professional and personal needs are unmet that could be targeted by a revised view of FPS membership.

(This may suggest that we consider a radical change in direction and purpose for the Society—I believe that we should be open to that thinking)

3. Explore what kinds of “membership” values and benefits might be attractive to the next generation of professionals and identify / confirm the principal reasons that 1000 people still pay dues every year.

(This is tied to those above and is an especially critical step for the future—I believe that we need professional help with getting answers to these questions—and that they won’t come easy or cheap. For whatever reason, 800-1000 people still find value in being associated with FPS. Any strategic planning or transformation process must make sure that we understand that value and build on it if possible—or don’t unduly damage it unless that is a necessary step to that future. )

4. Explore what actions are being taken by other similar membership-based non-professional organizations to maintain or grow membership.
5. Identify the core benefits and values that FPS must preserve to maintain a core of active professional members—however large or small that might be.

(If we decide that a 500-1000 member organization is in our future then we need to be really careful to understand what those core members need or want from FPS—and what will keep

them in the fold. This will be essential to planning the programs, leadership and member support organization needed to deliver that value cost effectively.

### Mission:

Here's some of the language we use to describe FPS:

"The Society's Mission is to foster innovation and research in the environmentally sound processing and use of wood and fiber resources by disseminating information and providing forums for networking and the exchange of knowledge."

"The Forest Products Society is an international not-for-profit technical association founded in 1947 to provide an information network for all segments of the forest products industry — from standing tree to finished product."

The underlined phrases are mine and are the core of what has sustained the society for the past 60 years. I believe that we must challenge the need for such an organization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Here are a few thoughts—I'm sure this will be a rich conversation.

1. There are a plethora of other information and network providers—what unique niche can be occupied by FPS that will allow it to grow? Industry and academe can get information from many sources—why do they need FPS?

(This is both a value and market question. It may be that members see FPS providing unique value in terms of networking and a brand of information not found elsewhere. If that is so, then can that value be marketed to a new generation of members (or others) that will allow the Society to grow and evolve? Especially interesting might be understanding changes in networking opportunities and needs that used to be met by attending FPS section, national and specialty meetings.)

2. Will the current mission and business model be attractive to the FP industrial and academe base of the future?

(The academic base supporting renewable materials is fragmented and declining. Current FP programs are largely embedded in NR programs that are increasingly ambivalent to active management of domestic resources that are the heart of FPS. This will get much worse in the next five years because of the ongoing transformation of the Land-Grant universities, delayed fallout from the recession that will impact all programs for many years, and the lack of federal research funding that will drive current and faculty away from FP interests. There may be some short-term gains to be made around bio energy and partnerships with agriculture interests. However, tying the future of FPS to academic interests is not, in my opinion, a recipe for future success, but in the short run they are important to any transition.)

(The industrial base is essential to the future of FPS. That traditional base is in a period of decline, change and globalization. There will be fewer domestic technical workers in this industry because of consolidation and downsizing. There will be fewer of the traditional corporate sponsors. There is some evidence of increasing polarization between relatively sophisticated and unsophisticated producers that have very different information needs. The traditional industry is not very innovative relative to others. Unless we redefine the scope of FPS and do a better job of understanding future industrial needs the pool of those who might be interested in what FPS can offer to industry will continue to decline.

Another troubling observation is the decline of participation in traditional industry workshops and conferences all across the country. This is pretty universal among the few FP-related outreach education programs with some exceptions related to a few very hot topics. This has happened for several years now and is often explained by industry not having the cash or people to attend. The questions then are: a) how valuable or necessary is education and knowledge to these stakeholders and the future of their business? b) are their needs being met in other ways that suggest that the delivery methods are obsolete?, and c) if the economy returns, will stakeholders see these programs as important for their future worthy of investment, or discover that they were doing ok without them? )

3. It is tempting to think that if FPS could become a leader in electronic information and education delivery then the future might be brighter.

(FPS is not a player in this arena so some investment is essential to avoid rapidly increasing irrelevance. The future is very limited if our strongest attributes are a weak paper-based journal and an annual meeting. However, there are other competitors in this arena and we must identify a business model and future products that can work. Open source publishing will grow in popularity and put considerable pressure on the future of FPJ. We need to be very careful and not pin our hopes on a 21<sup>st</sup> Century electronic FPS—that will likely be necessary, but I do not feel that it will be sufficient.