

# COMMENTARY

## The Case Against Registration Of Geologists

By John D. McLeod  
Allen, Texas

Last year's abortive attempt to enact a registration (licensing) law for geologists in Texas is considered by many a watershed effort for the licensing movement. Because of the traditional dominance of petroleum geologists in the state, it is reasoned, a victory in this ostensibly hostile territory could be the linchpin in a crusade toward nationwide licensing.

Although registration advocates have recently received a forum in the AAPG Explorer and elsewhere, an alternative point of view is felt, if not frequently articulated, by the majority of geologists who have helped to actively and passively thwart licensing efforts in Texas and other states.

Since its inception in California over twenty years ago, registration has been advocated primarily by geologists employed in the public sector, or whose clientele seek compliance with government regulations. It is understandable that in a world dominated by registered engineers, bar-examined and board-certified attorneys and licensed environmental health specialists, unregistered environmental geologists, hydrogeologists and engineering geologists might believe themselves to be a disadvantaged underclass, deprived the legal status necessary for career advancement and professional prestige.

Although registration is somewhat

variable from state to state, some generalizations about it can be drawn. A typical registration board consists of a panel of geologists, appointed by the governor, from representative specialties. The principal functions of the board are to collect dues, sell embossing seals, test applicants, publish a membership directory, convene meetings, and invoke enforcement against unlicensed geologists. A bachelor's degree, a minimum tenure of experience, and passage of a test are usually required for licensure. A "grandfather" period usually allows any geologist to be licensed without testing during the first year of operation. Once registered, geologists are free to practice any geologic specialty, although specialty certification may be available. They are also not normally subject to re-testing, continuing education or specific work requirements to maintain registration as long as dues are paid.

Registration's purposes are often cited as: 1) the protection of public health, welfare and safety; 2) the establishment of a code of professional ethics; and 3) the response to public opinion. The credo is similar, if not identical, to a plethora of other state licensing bureaus that claim the mantle of public protection as their chief reason for operation.

Once established, the effectiveness of registered versus unregistered geologists in preventing or mitigating calamities with a geological component is not gauged. For example, the design and construction of what became engineering disasters during the recent California earthquake were undoubtedly approved by a variety of licensed professionals. It is not known, however, if they should be blamed for what failed, or thanked for what didn't, because licensing lacks a mechanism to account for both its successes (if any) and its failures. It is born of the faith that regulation embodies order and control, and therefore must

be beneficial to the welfare of society.

The promotion of ethics is another frequently cited goal, one that has long been embraced by local and specialized geological organizations. Nonetheless, there is some irony in this assertion when the registration movement is, as argued here, largely a subterfuge for labor issues and individual career aspirations.

Finally, the claim of public impetus stems from the efforts of geologists themselves, invariably citing the exaggeration that all the other states are doing it (and we don't want to be last). For the record, fifteen states currently have registration laws, four have a legal definition of a geologist or hydrogeologist, and two have certification programs. Each year, a handful of states examines the issue, and most decide not to enact registration. Arkansas is the only state bordering Texas that licenses geologists, and there is no reason to believe that if Texas goes, others will follow.

Public justifications aside, licensing advocates seek an agenda based on 1) parity in professional status and compensation with other licensed professionals, especially engineers; 2) educational and experiential parity amongst geologists; and 3) the establishment of professional "turf" that is legally protected from other professions and unlicensed geologists. What is wrong with this agenda, and why should geologists care?

In the labor marketplace, demand for education, experience, and skills determine an individual's worth relative to peers and other professions. In many engineering organizations, environmental geologists, hydrogeologists and engineering geologists function as technicians who may be perpetually and uncomfortably subordinate. Although we can all sympathize, the tonic for career stagnation lies in education, training, experience, and the development of new

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skills to better ones' options. For some, this may ultimately mean earning a degree in engineering, law, planning or other discipline to complement a geologic background. As most of us have learned, the demand for geologists is driven by highly cyclic market forces, and adaptability to new specialties is often the key to professional survival.

A second unspoken goal of some proponents of registration is to seek educational and experiential parity amongst geologists. In other words, it is a legal tool to socially eliminate or mitigate the competitive advantages of education, experience, skills or accomplishments attained by individuals. A bachelor-level geologist (and friend of the governor) with a brief career in government regulation might well rule a registration board, writing and administering test questions to a seasoned Ph.D. Similarly, licensing organizations provide no recommendations to prospective employers that would allow informed hiring decisions based on traditional earned credentials.

Professional turf is important to all of us, and there are some compelling reasons for all geologists to aggressively oppose the documented overreach of registered engineers, landscape architects, attorneys and others into geological and related business domains. The real question about licensing is one of honesty about ourselves and our profession. Through licensing are we really trying to protect public health, welfare and safety, and promote ethics, or are we trying to create laws to protect and enhance our professional welfare?

Accredited colleges and universities vouch for the academic preparedness of young geologists, and testing of neophytes by licensing boards only usurps their authority. A geology career, differing from market-ready disciplines like engineering and law, is not often a stand-alone occupation, but one which works best in concert with others. Market forces winnow us throughout our lives, and frequently determine our specializations.

Registration is at its best superfluous and at worst a dishonest expansion of government authority. Fifteen states in twenty years hardly portends universality. Instead of creating more regulation, geologists in other states should seek to decommission their boards if they prove ineffective, incompetent, self-serving or political. In the final analysis, the subterfuge of registration lowers our standards, and diminishes our reputation for objectivity as scientists.

## Editor's Comments

As we began this edition, I considered some recent additions in the *Bulletin* that you may have noticed. First of all, we have been able to maintain a continuing set of regular columns with the help of our readers, who submit quality articles and reprints. Such sections as Useful Utilities and Investor Interest have been well supported by input from many non-members. Secondly, we have had a great resource in a variety of topics. Quick Look Techniques, Related Research, and several areas like this month's Subjective Definitions, Geophysical Reflection, and Energy and Jobs provide diversity to our content. Thirdly, the Business of Geology has had significant contributions, including this month's copy with reprints from Victor Schmidt on recent industry gatherings and forecasts.

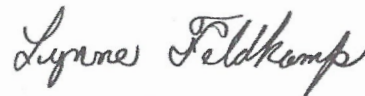
We still are in need of features where case studies, tools, and techniques provide an educational device for many of us in exploration, development, and environmental roles. International articles are requested to share significant basin and regional interpretations. How about

a Geo-tale to share unique adventures with our Houston group?

Please accept this invitation to brush-up an old contemplation or thought-provoking question. Ask for feedback from our society via this publication. After all, it is our forum to express ideas to over 5000 geologists! Help us start a series of written dialogues to express pertinent theory.

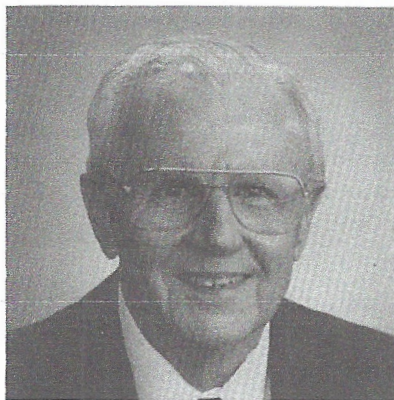
And finally, Bill Eisenhardt, who provided the Exploration Activity column for over 10 years, passed away on Friday, February 18th. He was a dedicated HGS volunteer, and spent 3 to 4 days per month in the office developing his section. Bill received the President's Award in 1990 for his service and technical contributions to the geological community. He was an essential member of our committee and will be sadly missed.

Thanks for your comments, as always,



Lynne Feldkamp

## A Tribute



William "Bill" Eisenhardt age 71, passed away February 18, 1994.

Thinking of the late Bill Eisenhardt as we knew him on the HGS Bulletin Committee, these are some of the words that come to mind.

gentle	diligent
reserved	patient
faithful	thorough
ethical	quiet
respectful	friendly
courteous	sociable
decent	gracious
helpful	thoughtful
dedicated	whimsical

We miss you, Bill.

— Bill Roberts

*Our March 1994 feature by Wayne E. Jones entitled "Bob West Field - Zapata and Starr Counties, A Developing Giant" was reprinted with permission from the Bulletin of the South Texas Geological Society, January 1994.*