
OUTFITTER CERTIFICATION PROJECT

“Developing a Model”

**Saskatchewan Outfitters Association
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1. PROJECT OVERVIEW

A. Sector Profile

Outfitting is a sub-sector of the Saskatchewan Tourism Industry and is the largest single source of export dollars in the industry. The outfitting sector consists primarily of small owner-operated businesses, which are responsible for providing equipment, guides and accommodations for hunting, angling and touring experiences throughout the province. There are approximately 600 registered outfitters in the province. The Saskatchewan Outfitters Association (SOA) represents the outfitting industry under a mandate that includes marketing, liaisons and membership services.

In 1996, the economic contribution of outfitting in Saskatchewan was estimated to be \$200 million in gross economic impact for primarily the rural and small community economy. The outfitting industry provides about 2,000 person-years of direct employment each year, and a significant amount of indirect employment in support service industries such as motels, restaurants, food processing and taxidermy. One third of the northern work force is employed by the outfitting industry, mostly on a seasonal basis. An estimated \$150 million is spent (put back into the economy) by outfitters in Saskatchewan for employment, accommodations, food services, supplies and equipment.

Outfitting occurs in all areas of the province. Big game and bird outfitting are more common in Southern Saskatchewan while angling outfitting is more common in the North. A growing number of outfitting operations are owned and/or managed by Metis or First Nations individuals.

The industry relies heavily on strong partnerships with provincial regulatory and environment and resource management bodies. Outfitters have an inherent interest in the sustained management of Saskatchewan's natural environment and have been leaders in this area.

Over the last few years, the industry has identified the service component as being critical to maintaining its competitiveness. The industry deals in a world market with the majority of clients coming from the United States and Europe. Various other areas of Canada, the United States, Mexico, Russia and South Africa offer products similar to those found in Saskatchewan. Providing superior services and fostering value-added products are essential for the continued success of the industry.

The regulatory environment, in which the industry presently operates, does not recognize or address the quality of the outfitting experience. The industry and the public sector have taken some initiatives to address this situation. To date, discussions have centered on separating the wildlife management component from the business component with the latter to be more reflective of industry needs. It is proposed that a new system be established which would reflect service standards and other business ethics.

B. Background

During the late 1980's there was considerable growth within the outfitting industry, particularly in the big game hunting sector. Many new outfitters were licensed; some were and continue to be ill prepared to competently manage their business, resulting in customer service, which does not meet client expectations. This dissatisfaction over service in the outfitting industry negatively impacts the entire industry and can ultimately impact market demand for Saskatchewan outfitting services.

Examples of identifiable client dissatisfaction relate to quality of accommodation and equipment, the expertise of guides, the organization and effectiveness of the overall operation. More seriously, some complaints have been received from clients who have put down a deposit for future services, which were not forthcoming, or which did not meet promised expectations.

In October of 1996, the Executive of the Saskatchewan Outfitters Association met with the Provincial Cabinet. Being acknowledged as the industry's representative, the SOA received an endorsement to become more involved in establishing standards and accreditation of the industry and participating in the administration of outfitter licensing.

In 1997 the Department of Industry and Resources (formerly the Department of Economic and Co-operative Development) established a Business Services Improvement Branch with a focus to improve regulatory processes for businesses. The departmental team had as part of its mandate the responsibility to explore alternatives to regulations with an emphasis on the development of regulatory partnerships or self-management options. Officials from the Department of Industry and Resource's provided input and assistance to this initiative.

Tourism Saskatchewan also participated and will continue to participate in facilitating improvements in the outfitting industry and enhancing the overall tourism appeal of Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council (STEC) will continue to participate in the development and delivery of education and accreditation programs.

The Policy on Outfitting in Saskatchewan, which was completed in the spring of 1997 by the Saskatchewan Environment (formerly Sask Environment and Resource Management), states that "the department will encourage the outfitting industry to participate in the resolution of outfitting and development of outfitting programs through a single representative body" and "the department will require industry accreditation of an applicant as a prerequisite to issuing or renewing an outfitters license".

The outfitting industry in Canada promotes professional standards to ensure that the quality of service from its members is high, and to maintain the good reputation of the industry in Canada, the U.S.A. and in Europe. To facilitate these objectives within Saskatchewan, the SOA moved forward with Saskatchewan Environment's 1997 report (*The Policy on Outfitting in Saskatchewan*) which suggested that the outfitting industry participate in the licensing process.

The SOA proposed a system whereby outfitters would be licensed by the SOA. This would ensure outfitters had at least some minimum qualifications for a license. Incentives would encourage outfitters to work towards higher standards and a higher license category. Special provisions would grant licenses to existing outfitters who have been in business for many years.

Having the SOA license outfitters would benefit the industry by raising the professionalism and image of the sector on a National and Inter-national basis. This should increase client satisfaction, ultimately increase client numbers, and provide an enhanced level of consumer comfort and a process for dispute resolution.

Some outfitting operations while not in contravention of any legislation, are providing services that do not meet the expectations of their clients resulting in a poor image of the outfitting industry and the Saskatchewan tourism product.

With the development of an accreditation process, the direct economic impact to the industry could be significant. A precise economic impact is difficult to determine. However, for example, if each of the 600 outfitters in the province were able to attract a minimum of 10 new clients, at \$2000 per client, a conservative estimate of 12 million dollars in direct economic benefit could be generated to the industry.

Failure to introduce industry standards and accreditation would have the reverse effect to the industry and greater negative consequences to the tourism industry.

To move their licensing proposal forward the SOA developed and implemented in 1998 an initiative that had 3 major components or phases to it.

2. PROJECT INITIATIVE:

A. Phase I:

In 1998, the SOA received funding from Saskatchewan Learning (formerly the Department of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training) through the JobStart/Future Skills Sector Partnerships Program to partner with key stakeholders to identify, develop and validate professional standards for the outfitting industry.

The Phase I sector study report recommended the establishment of a certification process for the industry. The concept of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition was viewed as integral to its success in that existing outfitters were more apt to "buy in" if recognition was made of their existing abilities.

Priority areas identified in the Sector Study report included:

- The development of a prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) process to determine the knowledge and skills that have been learned through non-formal education/training or experience;
- The establishment of an Outfitter Licensing Commission that would reflect industry standards in the licensing process;
- The development of training programs (to enhance industry standards) that meet the needs of industry identified in the PLAR process that address certification and professional development needs; and
- The development of a professional industry trade publication that will provide industry with current and regular information particularly in the areas of regulations, marketing, customer service and business planning.

B. Phase II:

In 2000, Saskatchewan Learning provided additional funding through the Sector Partnerships Program, to assist the outfitting industry in the development of a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process as identified in Phase I. A PLAR process will determine the knowledge and skills that have already been learned by outfitters through non-formal education/training or experience. This was seen as the first step in laying the groundwork for ongoing training and education program development.

Activities completed in Phase II included:

- The development of outcomes and key indicators from the eight Professional Standards categories previously developed;
- The development of assessment tools and a process to measure the key indicators; and
- The development of an implementation strategy for the PLAR process

C. Phase III:

In 2002 the SOA received Phase III funding through the Sector Partnerships Program to develop, test and evaluate a certification process within the industry.

The following reflects the work undertaken in Phase III.

a) Project Objectives:

Funding assisted the SOA in undertaking the following:

- The development and implementation of a pilot project to test the PLAR instrument developed in Phase II to determine the degree of skills and knowledge of outfitters relative to industry standards;
- The completion of a gap analysis to identify training needs of industry required to obtain certification; and
- The Development of a model/process that will define policy and procedures to be followed in the certification process.

b) Methodology

➤ Partnerships

Throughout the three phases of this initiative the SOA has worked in partnership with the following stakeholders:

- Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council;
- Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology;
- Saskatchewan Learning;
- Saskatchewan Industry and Resources;
- Saskatchewan Outfitters Association and individual members; and
- Saskatchewan Tourism Authority

There is a need for these organizations to continue to collaborate and work together towards an education and licensing outcome.

➤ **Selection of Developer**

The same developer, David Eaton, was used through out all three phases of the initiative. The developer had also worked with industry representatives, both provincial and national. Working with nationally approved industry standards, he developed provincial training manuals for hunting guides and fresh water angling guides. This material was subsequently used by other provincial outfitting organizations across the country.

➤ **Industry Involvement**

Three industry sectors were involved in this project, hunting, game birds, and angling, with a wide cross-section of approximately 25 individual outfitters across the province.

In Phase I industry representatives participated in the development of Saskatchewan Industry Certification Standards. They were also directly involved in the interview process that followed. In addition, they were instrumental in outlining key elements of the PLAR process.

Industry input was key in the development and revision of training materials. This included a written examination and a list of potential interview questions. Because the industry is so diverse, questions had to reflect this diversity both regionally and within each industry sector.

Industry involvement in this project has been hands-on and constant, and it is evident in the relevance and practicality of the examination and interview questions. Without exception, this relevance was echoed by every pilot candidate.

c) Results

➤ **Development of the pilot project**

The first step in Phase III was to consolidate the national standards into seven measurable outcomes (see Appendix I). Under each Outcome, the following were identified:

- PLAR Method to be used (e.g. interview, examination, or work samples);
- Evidence that would be required;
- Key Performance Indicators; and
- Criteria that would be applied to each performance indicator.

The next step was to create assessment tools that would measure the desired Outcomes. These tools consisted of a written examination and interview questions. Care was taken to ensure questions were relevant to outfitters and that provincial information was accurate. Provincial documents were collected from various departments to create a "PLAR package" of resource materials. In addition to assembling documents in such areas as Occupational Health and Safety, Labour and Health, other helpful documents, such as the *Guide to Canadian Small Businesses*, were included.

The "PLAR Candidate Package" consists of the following materials (see Appendix II):

- Cover letter regarding the interview date and time;
- Directions on how to collect the required evidence and prepare for the exam and interview;
- List of required print resources (these were included in the package);
- List of Evidence Required;
- List of sample interview questions; and
- Open Book Exam.

➤ **Implementation of the pilot project**

Implementation of Phase III began with the identification of potential candidates. Twelve candidates were chosen from the various regional sectors, as well as from small, medium and large operations. The timing of interviews was critical because many outfitters were either at trade shows, preparing for the upcoming year, or actively involved in their operations. Many were willing to participate in the process, but did not have the time to complete the exam and interview.

Interviews were conducted on April 1, May 5 and 6, June 24, and August 20 and 26, 2003. Based on the feedback from candidates, questions were added, revised or removed. Some additional evidence was added to the required list. A list of required Evidence was sent to candidates. Feedback was positive. Although some candidates admitted being intimidated by the sheer volume of information, all candidates agreed that the process was valuable. One response, "It's a good idea to have everyone take this course," echoed the views of many. Three other comments are worthy of mention; these are:

- "It is worth paying for this certification process."
- This is a positive process; "it made me aware of the gaps in my knowledge."
- "Certification will 'professionalize' the industry."

➤ **Gap Analysis/Key Findings**

Master Outfitter Certification Committee:

A certification committee must be set up under the auspices of the SOA and should be open ended to include individuals who are outside the industry but who would have interest in industry standards and/or licensing. These could include representatives from Saskatchewan Environment, Saskatchewan Tourism Authority, First Nations and Metis and representation from training sectors. The committee could also act as an appeals committee in regards to issues surrounding the certification process.

Assessors:

Assessors will examine the credentials of each candidate via the formal PLAR process. The Assessors could be members of the Master Outfitter Certification Committee, or others approved by this committee, including First Nations and Metis individuals. In partnership with industry and training providers the SOA must develop a qualification process to select Assessors.

Advisors:

Each candidate should be assigned an Advisor. This is a normal part of the PLAR process. The principal goal of the Advisor will be to ensure the candidate is sufficiently prepared for the open-book test and the interview, and has assembled the necessary evidence to show he/she fulfills the requirements of each Outcome. This means the Advisor will explain the PLAR process, encourage the candidate to assemble all the evidence in a timely manner, and discuss any questions that may arise regarding the open-book test/interview portions of the PLAR process. This is a "hands-on" role, meaning the Advisor will examine the candidate's collected evidence to ensure it is authentic, sufficient, and current. The Advisor should make sure there are "no surprises" for the candidate.

Advisors should be able to communicate effectively with candidates. Candidates whose first language is not English could choose First Nations or Metis individuals to be their advisors.

Fee Structure:

A fee structure still needs to be determined. Fees would be charged for the services of one or more Assessors to conduct the interview, score the open-book exam, and assess the evidence that has been collected.

Training Needs:

The primary objective of the overall initiative was to create a certification process, but the developed documents can stand alone as training material and could form the basis of a competency-based curriculum. These documents and the provided print resources comprise one source of information for individuals; the other source is their industry experience. With these two sources of information, individuals should be able to acquire certification by the industry.

This being said, there is value in considering formal training programs. Formal training initiatives, if desirable, could be advanced through SIAST, the regional college system, Gabriel Dumont Institute, or other similar institutions. It is suggested this curriculum be taken out of the classroom; for example, this program could operate in a rented outfitting camp, or in tandem with an on-going outfitting operation. Training for potential outfitters would be provided by skilled personnel. A portion of the training could be offered in northern centers.

Training opportunities through joint ventures between First Nations, Metis and outfitters will have the best opportunity for overall success of outfitter certification programs in Aboriginal communities.

➤ **Development of the PLAR Certification Model and Policy Development**

Need for Grandfathering:

The statement, "the department will require industry accreditation of an applicant as a prerequisite to issuing or renewing an outfitters license," has the potential to intimidate outfitters. Since this policy statement was made by Saskatchewan Environment in 1997, the SOA has been working steadily to make accreditation a reality, but has also been working to reassure outfitters that this process will not adversely affect current outfitters.

To this end the SOA has recently adopted the mission statement of "**Working together to foster and promote excellence in outfitting**".

The industry sees accreditation as a valuable marketing tool as well as a means to upgrade standards of service but the downside is that some in the industry are intimidated by the thought of having to write exams or being interviewed by their peers. This intimidation has resulted in some resistance to accreditation and the SOA's solution is to grandfather outfitters who have been in business for five years or more when this process begins.

The significance of PLAR is that it gives credit to individuals for the knowledge, skills or attitudes they have gained in the past. This is key because the feedback received from the well-established pilot outfitters revealed that many of them did not need to study for many hours to complete the exam or prepare for the interview. They already knew what was required of them. Therefore certification need not be intimidating.

Individual Outfitters versus Business Outfitters Accreditation:

The Saskatchewan outfitting industry is going through a period of change. A rationalization is occurring within the industry demonstrated by the amalgamation of a number of businesses. This move away from "mom and pop" operations to a corporate structure will have repercussions. The corporate model might not have an owner/operator on sight but might use managers for various corporate functions. This shift must be recognized in terms of certification and licensing. To this end the proposed certification processes recognize both operations owned by individuals and those owned by companies/corporations.

Individual Outfitter Accreditation - Master Outfitter Designation:

A. Individual Outfitters in operation prior to the new licensing implementation date:

Category A 1): If an Outfitter has been in business for five (5) years or more prior to the new licensing date they will automatically qualify for the Master Outfitter designation (individual designation). (Grandfathering Clause)

This would then allow them to apply and qualify for the Outfitter Plus designation (business designation).

Category A 2): If an Outfitter has been in business for more than 1 but less than 5 years prior to the licensing date they must successfully operate/remain in business for a minimum of five (5) years before they can apply for the Master Outfitter designation through the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process

If successful they can then apply and qualify for the Outfitter Plus designation.

B. Individual Outfitters that begin operation of outfitting business in the province after the licensing process is implemented:

Category B 1): An Outfitter must successfully operate their business for a minimum of five (5) years, under a temporary license issued by Saskatchewan Environment, before they are eligible to apply and qualify for the Master Outfitter designation through the PLAR process.

If successful in this process they can they apply and qualify for the Outfitter Plus designation.

Category B 2): An Outfitter is issued a temporary license from Saskatchewan Environment to operate a business in the Province. If they choose not to exercise Category C they could exercise Option D that would enable them to operate under a temporary license for a minimum of fifteen (15) years. If after 15 years of successfully operating the business they would be eligible to apply and qualify for the Master Outfitter designation.

This would then enable them to apply and qualify for the Outfitter Plus designation.

Business Outfitters Accreditation - Outfitter Plus Designation

Outfitter Plus Designation Benefits:

- Designation will enable the business to qualify for a permanent license through the designated licensing agency (currently Saskatchewan Environment);
- Designation will enable the business to promote and market their business using the designation. In addition, the SOA will promote the designation program and will promote those Outfitters that have the designation; and
- Designation will provide consumer protection assurance.

Outfitter Plus Designation Criteria:

- The business must be licensed in the province of Saskatchewan for a minimum of 5 years;
- At least one individual at the management level must have the Master Outfitter designation;
- The business must be a member of the Saskatchewan Outfitters Association or other professional organization recognized for these purposes;
- The business must be free of any repeated, verified, valid customer complaints as adjudicated by the SOA Master Outfitter Certification Committee;
- The business must meet all provincial health, safety and labor requirements and must not be in contravention of any pertinent provincial regulations;
- The business must participate in industry consumer protection programs and liability insurance; and
- The business must be solvent.

Certification and Outfitter Licensing (Individual and Business)

****Only existing
businesses at time
of implementation**

d) Next Steps:

- Saskatchewan Environment has been a partner in the process of developing outfitter standards and certification. The results of phase 3 need to be presented to the Deputy Minister of Saskatchewan Environment in regards to the incorporation of standards into the licensing process.

The industry sees the benefits of certification and, through the pilot, candidates are beginning to understand the requirements of the PLAR process. To secure buy in and establish a good comfort level with a new licensing system, government and industry need to work together to devise a system that is beneficial to both parties.

If the outfitting industry is unable to secure the participation of government, alternate methods of certification will have to be developed that do not reflect the licensing process.

- A Master Outfitter Certification Committee should be established. Public interest would be served by the inclusion of various affected groups in the advent of licensing being reflective of outfitter certification.
- Assessors and advisors should be identified by the industry. Policies and procedures would need to be developed around these positions. Initially it would be desirable to identify a coordinator for this activity.
- A communication process will have to be developed to ensure all industry participants and associate groups have a good understanding of the process.
- A plan needs to be developed that would identify and prioritize avenues to educate the public on the advantages of this program.