Webster's New World Dictionary defines the term “ethics” as a system or code of morals of a particular person, group, or profession. Our society adopts morals to guide its members’ conduct, or behavior, to do as little harm as possible to the society’s sustainability. Many professional societies do the same.

When SWS first came into being, one of the more important things established by the founders was a Code of Ethics (found following this article). The purpose of this Code was to establish a code of moral conduct that had a very specific meaning: that is to establish an ethically fair, reasonable, and academically sound basis for the practice of wetland science and management.

The SWSPCP has recently established an Ethics Committee that has been charged with overseeing any charges of a violation of the SWS and SWSPCP code of ethics. The committee consists of seven members of SWS that are certified PWS in good standing: three members are the sitting chairs of the SWSPCP Review Panel, Certification Standards Committee, and Certification Appeals Board, and the other four are appointed by the SWSPCP President and consist of a chair and three representatives at large. When appointing the latter four, the President tries to appoint members that represent a wide range of geographic areas and several different professional fields, including private, regulatory, and academic.

Standing rules to guide the committee were recently completed and enacted into the SWSPCP Bylaws (available on the SWSPCP website @ wetlandcert.org). The purpose of this article is to introduce the SWS/SWSPCP community to the complaint process and present an explanation of the philosophy and mechanisms that were used to put them into place.

How the Process Works:

Any individual, or a professional organization, that believes that a certified Professional Wetland Scientist (PWS) or Wetland Professional in Training (WPIT) has knowingly breached the SWSPCP Code of Ethics, may file a written, signed complaint. If the complaint is from a professional organization, a responsible officer of that organization must submit and sign the form. Proof of the officer’s affiliation and authority must be provided. A downloadable version of the form is available on the second page of the SWSPCP website. If a complainant does not have computer access, hard copies of the form may be obtained from our business office (Burk & Associates, 1313 Dolley Madison Blvd, Suite 402, McLean, VA, 22101) or by contacting me directly (VIMS, Gloucester Point, VA, 23062). The Complainant must provide all pertinent evidence (photos, letters, affidavits, etc.) and attach them to the Ethics Complaint Form. If a complainant does not have computer access, hard copies of the form may be obtained from our business office (Burk & Associates, 1313 Dolley Madison Blvd, Suite 402, McLean, VA, 22101) or by contacting me directly (VIMS, Gloucester Point, VA, 23062). The Complainant must provide all pertinent evidence (photos, letters, affidavits, etc.) and attach them to the Ethics Complaint Form. Any form that is not signed by a responsible adult, or does not have attached evidence, will be returned to the complainant and no action will be taken on that complaint.

Please note that anonymous complaints will not be considered. The SWSPCP Board of Directors and several (fledgling) Ethics Committee members conducted several long discussions at board meetings concerning the options available. It was unanimously concluded that if anonymous complaints were allowed, the Ethics Committee would spend an inordinate amount of time weeding through unsubstantiated complaints. Since the consequences of being found guilty of a breach of ethics may be professionally, and financially, damaging to a defendant, we felt that all parties involved in the process needed to be identified at the beginning of the process. The only exception to this rule is that if the Committee decides that the initial complaint is not valid, and the complaint is returned to the Complainant without further action (see below), the defendant will not be notified.

Once the SWSPCP Business Office receives a complaint form, and attached evidence, it will be immediately forwarded to the Chair of the Ethics Committee. The Chair, with advice from the other members of the committee, will make a preliminary determination within 14 days of receiving the complete form and evidence from the business office as to whether the complaint is viable or not. If the complaint is deemed non-viable, it will be returned to the complainant who will be notified of discrepancies with an explanation of why it was not viable. At the discretion of a majority of the committee,