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Hiring a Consulting Forester

Jeff Martin

What is a Consulting Forester?

An independent consulting forester (consultant) is a trained professional forester that operates or works for a private business. The typical independent consultant is self-employed or works for a small company employing 1 to 3 other consultants and/or forestry technicians.

Like others in private business, the consultant charges a fee for time and expenses or for services rendered. Consultants provide a wide range of services for corporate landowners, public landowners and non-industrial private landowners like you. Some consultants may also work for potential landowners, investors, insurance companies, appraisers and others.

An independent consultant is one who does not engage in buying timber for a forest products firm. Most independent consultants work full time at their business, although some consult on a part-time basis, or during retirement or as a sideline to their regular employment. The typical consulting firm offers comprehensive forest management advice and does not just act as your agent for selling timber.

Forest industry and timber dealers often have foresters who assist landowners and they sometimes

use the term consultant. Often, these foresters also actively procure wood for a mill.

It is important to recognize these differences as you consider if a consulting forester is "right for you."

Why Hire a Consultant?

Perhaps the first thing to consider is "why utilize the services of any forester" on your property? First, a professional forester will help you achieve your ownership goals and will make sure that the forestry practices used enhance the future condition and value of your woodland. You will get the job done right.

Second, a timber sale almost always generates more income when a forester assists with the marketing. By using a forester, you will get what your timber is worth. You will also get an appropriate sale contract and sale administration. During a timber harvest, the consultant will periodically inspect the logging, one of the most critical steps in managing your woodland.

A consulting forester can offer a wider range of services than can most other foresters, and can handle most jobs from start to finish. Or, they may handle only a part of the job if you so choose. Consultants can provide services that may be prohibited from other foresters.

For example, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) limits, by statute, the services their foresters provide private landowners. The DNR refers most timber sales to cooperating consulting foresters. In addition, DNR foresters cannot prepare contracts, supervise their performance or otherwise act as a landowner's agent.

Public foresters may also have restrictions on the time they can allot to your forest management needs. In Wisconsin, DNR foresters can give 24 hours (three work days) of technical service each year to an individual landowner.

An independent consultant works for you, the landowner, and not for a timber buyer, wood-using firm, or the government. A consultant will serve as your agent in a variety of technical matters related to managing your woodland.

Landowners, foresters and timber buyers must work together to achieve a well-managed forest. However, the consulting forester and the buyer may not always see "eye-to-eye." Both look at the project on your land from a different perspective. Your consulting forester looks out for your best interests and works hard to obtain top dollar and increase the future productivity of your woodland. However, some timber buyers may feel this pushes prices too high and profits too low.

As a landowner you undoubtedly want top value, but you should also hope the contract conditions satisfy the buyer so that the logger performs careful work. When you select a consulting forester the ideal choice is an individual or company that both the landowners and timber buyers rate highly. Reputable buyers work well with reputable consultants.

In summary, the less you know about forestry and the less time you can spend in your woodlands, the more you need a consulting forester.

What Can a Consultant Do For You?

Consulting foresters offer a wide range of services. The number and type of services offered vary among consultants. The shaded box below lists services that may be available from a consulting forester.

Services offered by Consulting Foresters may include:

- Acquisition and sale of forestlands
- Aerial photo mapping and interpretation
- Appraisals: land, timber, damage, trespass
- Arboriculture
- Christmas tree management
- Cost Basis determination
- Environmental impact statements
- Forest inventory and cruising
- Forest management planning and plans
- Forest resource and economic studies
- Landscape planning
- Litigation and expert testimony
- Logging engineering
- Pest control
- Recreation-planning and development
- Road location, design and construction
- Shade tree appraisals
- Specialty product marketing
- Surveying and boundary establishment
- Thinning and pruning
- Timber Tax counseling
- Timber sales: preparation and administration
- Timber sales: solicit bids & prepare contracts
- Timber stand improvement
- Tree planting and site preparation
- Urban forestry
- Watershed protection
- Wildlife management

A consultant asks about your ownership goals, collects inventory information from your woodlands and suggests alternatives for reaching your goals. A consultant can draft a written management plan that incorporates your goals and the steps for accomplishing them.

A consulting forester and crew can prepare your old-field for tree planting, order the tree seedlings and plant the trees when they arrive. A consultant may provide services to release the seedlings from competition and assess the survival and future potential of your new stand.

A consultant, acting as your agent, can prepare a timber sale prospectus, advertise the sale, solicit bids, conduct tours for prospective bidders, assess the bids, negotiate and prepare a contract, handle payments, close the sale, etc. A consultant can monitor all on-going forestry operations in your woodland (such as timber stand improvement or timber harvest) for compliance with contract stipulations.

Often these practices and services demand greater knowledge and expertise than many landowners possess. If this is your situation, a consultant may be the answer.

How Can You Find a Consultant?

When looking for a consulting forester you should first stop by the Wisconsin DNR Office in your county (either where you reside or where your woodland is located). Each year the DNR prepares and distributes a booklet (*Directory of Consulting Foresters*) containing the names, addresses, services, etc. of all consulting foresters that have signed a cooperative agreement with the DNR. Most consultants working in Wisconsin signed the agreement. The booklet is free.

When deciding which consultant to contact, you should consider a number of factors that the DNR booklet also includes:

- Education and years of experience in the profession of forestry are important qualifications. Does the consultant have a BS degree in forestry, a degree from a technical school, or a degree in some other field? How long has the consultant worked in the field of forestry, and how long as a consultant?
- Does the consultant maintain an affiliation with professional associations and organizations such as the Society of American

Foresters or the Association of Consulting Foresters (both of whom have membership standards or requirements)?

- Is the consultant an independent business person, or is the individual an industrial forester working for a wood-using firm?
- Is your woodland in a county where the consultant normally works? Some consultants cover the entire state (and beyond), others restrict service to certain counties.
- How far is the consultant's office from your woodland? For consultants who cover large areas travel expenses may affect your fee, particularly if the job is small. Large jobs may be economical at any distance. Local consultants may also have greater knowledge of local markets and practices.

Everyone will weigh these factors differently, placing more emphasis on some than others. However, you should certainly evaluate each item before selecting a consultant.

How Much Will A Consultant Cost?

Fees charged by consulting foresters vary considerably and change over time, as do other business costs. Therefore, this publication does not list specific rates.

Most consultants have a range of rates depending on the forestry practice, property size, travel distance and time required. They may charge by the hour, by the day, by the acre or by the job. With timber sales, consultants often charge a percentage of gross sale income. Some consultants may have a minimum fee for various practices.

Often, landowners wonder if the benefits of hiring a consultant are worth the costs. For many the answer is yes. Research from a number of states shows that professional forestry assistance produces higher timber sale returns and higher residual stand values. The consultant's fee is frequently more than offset by these higher values. A recent Wisconsin survey found that 88 percent of the responding landowners who had hired a consultant were satisfied with the service obtained.

What Should You Do...Before Talking To A Consultant?

One of the first things a consultant will ask is "what are your goals for the property?" Therefore, it would be wise for you and your family (or partners) to think about what you want to accomplish on the property and then list your goals on paper. If you do this, you and the consultant will have a good base from which to discuss management options.

If you already have a written forest management plan send the consultant a copy. This will help facilitate discussions the two of you will have.

You should locate any records of past forestry activities on your property. Information about previous tree planting, timber harvests and other practices will help the consultant evaluate your present and future management needs.

Another thing to have, if you can, would be maps and/or aerial photos of your woodland property. These will help orient the consultant to the layout and size of your property. Ideally, you should identify property boundaries on the maps (or photos) and on the ground (for example, well-maintained fence lines, paint spots on trees, plastic flagging, etc.)

Also, determine whether any wood-using firm has contractual rights to your timber if you sell. You may have signed such an agreement in the past and any prospective consultant would need to know this before committing to working for you.

What Should You Ask...When You Talk To A Consultant?

The questions you should ask and discuss with a prospective consultant deal mainly with scope of service, timing, reliability, management options and cost. Listed below are some, but certainly not all, of the questions to raise when you talk with a consultant:

- **SCOPE...**Does your firm provide full service for the management practices that would be implemented? What are your limitations? Do

you plan to subcontract any of the work? Do you have the equipment needed to do the work?

- **TIMING...**When can you start working on my property? How long will you need to complete all of the work...part of the work? How much time will you devote to my property and projects? What is your availability throughout the project? Is your business full-time or part-time? Are current markets (and prices) for the products I might sell "up" or "down;" what changes do you foresee?
- **RELIABILITY...**Can you provide names of former or current clients who will serve as references? Is your staff or crew permanent or temporary? Will someone closely supervise them during the project? What kind of service contract do you use?
- **INSURANCE...**What about liability for injuries and property damage? Do you carry business liability insurance or include a waiver in your service contract?
- **MANAGEMENT OPTIONS...**What is your philosophy or attitude toward forest use and land stewardship? Are my goals feasible? If not...what are some other options that I could pursue? What practices or projects should we do first in my woodland? What are some probable future practices or projects?
- **COSTS...** What is your best estimate of total cost? What are your estimates for various parts or practices? How fixed is the estimate (plus or minus how much)?

Check Those References!

Once you have discussed your needs and asked questions of two or more consultants you are nearly ready to decide. But first, check the references that each consultant provides. Any reliable consultant will gladly provide several landowner references and you should definitely contact a few.

When you do, ask these landowners if they are satisfied with the timeliness, quality and cost of the service received. Ask the references if the consulting forester helped them accomplish the goals they had in mind for their woodland. If you are unsure about forest management activities on

your property, try to visit the woodlands owned by these references.

Lastly, decide whether you like the consultant and if the consultant understands your goals. Is the rapport good?

Get it in Writing!

Once you and your consultant agree on the steps to take, make sure that a contract or letter of agreement is prepared and signed by both parties. Remember, this is a business relationship so handle everything in a business-like manner.

The contract or letter should specify the exact nature of the work, the method of determining a fee, cost estimates and a time schedule for starting and completing the work. Your consultant will no doubt have a contract preference, but these items should be addressed in some form.

Make sure that you understand the written contract. Ask questions if you do not. Get involved before management activities commence. If your consultant prepares a management plan, be sure that you also understand what it says and what the probable results will be. You do not want any surprises!

A Final Word...

Should you hire a consulting forester? Is it worthwhile? For many landowners the answer is yes. Some will say you cannot afford to do otherwise.

DNR's Directory of Consulting Foresters...

If your local DNR Office is currently unable to supply you with a copy of the *Directory of Consulting Foresters*, please contact:

Private Forestry Specialist
Division of Forestry
PO Box 7921
Madison, WI 53707
(608) 266-2289

Or:
DNR county offices
<http://dnr.wi.gov/contact/OfficeLocations.html>

DNR cooperating forester list
<http://dnr.wi.gov/files/pdf/pubs/fr/FR0021.pdf>

About the Author: Jeff Martin is professor emeritus, Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison.