

Hiring a Consulting Forester

BILL COOK, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION FORESTER

EXTENSION BULLETIN E-3188
OCTOBER 2012

What is a Consulting Forester?

A consulting forester (consultant) is a professional forester with a forestry degree from an accredited university program. A consultant's principal business activity is providing forestry advice to the public on a fee or contractual basis. Consultants do not have financial interests in a timber purchasing or procurement entity. Consultants are usually self-employed or work for another consultancy with a handful of other employees. Their main focus is on the private forest owner who hires them.

Forest product companies, timber buyers, logging contractors, and public agencies may contract with or employ professional



foresters to help forest owners with forest management and timber sales. Some of these foresters might use the term "consultant" when their main obligation is the company they work for. A "true" consultant is independent. Their activities are linked only with services rendered to private forest owners.

Forestry consultants possess different ranges of expertise. Like many professional service providers, they have different frames of reference and utilize different approaches. Finding the "right" consultant to best fit your needs is important.

There are about 120 consulting foresters in Michigan that are well distributed throughout the state and available in every county.

What Other Kinds of Foresters Are There?

Foresters employed by governmental units provide professional forestry services for a public agency, usually on public forest lands. They work for agencies such as the Michigan DNR, U.S. Forest Service, Conservation Districts, MSU Extension, and others. Some agencies may provide education and private landowner guidance.

Foresters employed by companies procure and/or purchase timber on behalf of their employer, or manage forests owned by a corporation. These foresters may work for a forest products company, an independent logger, or an investment group.

Non-profit groups will sometimes hire foresters to manage properties, work with forest ownership, or help determine forest policy. Foresters might work for forest conservancies, land trusts, and similar groups.

Why Hire a Consultant?

A consulting forester can offer the widest range of services among foresters. Public service foresters are limited in what services they may provide, although their involvement may be required for certain cost-share programs. A consultant has no such limitations.

Forest owners often question the need to spend money for the services of a forestry consultant. Most forest owners who do so are glad that they did because the experience of a consultant complements the knowledge of a forest owner.

Forests, forest ecology, road planning, and habitat enhancement are often more complicated than most people realize. Forest practices and management strategies are based upon ecological principles and the goals of the forest owner. Forestry has many technical and financial aspects. A consultant will be able to guide a forest owner through a decision-making process.

Few forest owners rank revenue high among their priorities, but they do have a vision for the future and a wish list of reasons for owning property. A consultant can help an owner achieve these goals and offer various strategies based on the capacity of the land and forest. Typically, a consultant will sit down with the



landowner and work out a plan for the long range management of the forest. This plan will be based on the landowner's goals and objectives and can be passed down through the generations.

As for timber sales, harvests provide revenue as well as environmental services, habitat enhancement,

and visual outcomes. The idea of a timber sale is daunting to many. Using the services of an experienced consultant to implement management plan recommendations greatly reduces the risk of adverse results, encourages regeneration, increases the likelihood of reaching expectations, and usually nets greater benefits. In addition, money invested often increases timber sale income, should harvests occur.

Timber sale methods and contracts have their own processes and language. Marketing the trees to the best loggers takes experience. Loggers also have a range of abilities and equipment configurations. A practiced eye to administer and monitor the sale will help avoid misunderstandings and protect against damage to trees that remain. Income tax implications are significant and should be accommodated in timber sale design.

Timber markets vary with species, product, site, access, season, harvest specifications, overall economy, and many other

factors. Pricing can appear fickle and may change (up or down) within only a few months or with timber sale method.

A well-managed forest often requires cooperation among various interests. A consultant can navigate the forest owner through these opportunities and help the owner determine what is most appropriate.

What Does a Consultant Do For You?

Forestry services cover a wide range of expertise. Consultants have different sets of experience. The gray box to the right lists many of the skills potentially available.

A consultant will work with you to understand and articulate your ownership goals and reasons for owning forest property. A consultant will collect information about you and your forest, and then offer options based on that knowledge. Most consultants will begin with a written management plan to help chart the directions the owner wishes to follow.

The experience of a consultant will help assemble technical knowledge to implement particular forestry practices or timber sales, within the constraints of forest owner goals and property limitations.

For example, tree planting is a common practice. A successful plantation requires site preparation, vegetation control, appropriate species selection, monitoring, etc. A consultant will help an owner understand why a practice is needed, the options involved, and then make sure it gets done. Sometimes, a cost-share program may be available and the consultant can help the landowner identify those opportunities.



The same is true for timber sales and thinning operations. A consultant 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 good consultant will monitor all on-going forestry operations in your woodland (such as timber stand improvement or timber harvest) for compliance with contract stipulations and forest owner wishes.

Many times, forestry practices and services require more knowledge than many forest owners possess. If this is your situation, a consultant may be the answer.

Services offered by Consulting Foresters may include:

- Acquisition and sale of forestlands *
- Aerial photo / satellite imagery mapping & interpretation
- Appraisals: land, timber, damage, trespass *
- Biomass harvest for energy products
- Christmas tree management
- Conservation easements
- Cost-share program navigation
- Environmental impact statements
- Food plot establishment
- Forest health assessment
- Forest inventory and cruising
- Forest management planning and plan writing
- Forest resource and economic studies
- GPS and GIS services
- Income tax assistance*
- Insect & disease control and monitoring
- Invasive species control
- Landscape planning
- Litigation and expert testimony
- Membership in forest associations
- Ownership succession
- Permit acquisition
- Pond construction
- Property tax programs*
- Recreation-planning and development
- Road location, design, and construction
- Salvage from storms, wildfire, diseases, etc.
- Specialty product marketing
- Surveying and boundary establishment*
- Thinning and pruning
- Timber sales: preparation and administration
- Timber sales: solicit bids & prepare contracts
- Timber stand improvement
- Tree planting and site preparation
- Urban/residential forestry and arboriculture*
- Watershed protection
- Wildlife habitat management

* May require additional certifications and/or licenses.

How to Contact a Consultant?

Nearly all of Michigan is covered by at least one or two forestry consultants. The Michigan State University Department of Forestry and MSU Extension provide an on-line directory of consultants. Searches are done by counties and each consultant listing includes a list of services offered. The URL is <http://www.for.msu.edu> under the Extension & Outreach tab. The directory is self-selective and listings are not screened.

The Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF) has a website with a forester search tool <http://www.acf-foresters.com> and provides excellent information about consultants and consulting services. Foresters on the list have been rigorously screened by the ACF. The Michigan DNR has a list of certified plan writers, who are professional forestry consultants at: <http://www.michigandnr.com/fspplanwriter>.

The Michigan Forest Association maintains a list of consulting foresters at [<http://michiganforests.com/forester.htm>].

County Conservation Districts and other public service foresters often have experience with referring forest owners to forestry consultants and other specialists. Some Districts employ foresters that can assist with certain activities.

What Qualifications Should a Consultant Have?

Selecting a consulting forester should be done carefully. Talk with several consultants. Check references and their participation in professional societies and certification programs. Reputable and well-recognized consultants tend to work with reputable logging contractors and other service providers.



Formal education and years of experience in the profession of forestry are important qualifications. Does the consultant have a bachelor's or master's degree in forestry from a university accredited through the Society of American Foresters? Does the consultant have degrees from another natural resources field? How long has the consultant worked in the field of forestry, and how long as a consultant?

Does the consultant have experience in the kinds of activities that you wish to see on your property? Are there references? Do you know other forest owners who have employed the services of the consultant?

Does the consultant belong to professional associations and organizations such as the Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF) or Society of American Foresters (SAF)? Both organizations have membership standards and requirements. The SAF has a rigorous Certified Forester program and the ACF has rigorous membership eligibilities. Is the consultant active on statewide forestry committees? Is the consultant an independent business operator or is the individual an industrial forester working for a wood-using firm or logging contractor?

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.

How well does the consultant communicate with you? Does he/she explain unfamiliar terms and concepts? Are you comfortable asking questions?

Various qualifications will be more or less important to different forest owners. Each owner needs to determine which consultant has the best fit.

Ultimately, homework is required prior to hiring any consultant. Check the credentials and field experience. Talk to references. Unfortunately, there are folks who claim to have these credentials

and experience, but do not. The right match between landowner and consultant can be a lifelong relationship that benefits both, as well as the forest.

How Do Consultants Charge Fees?

Like most other service providers, fee schedules vary widely among consultants and the type of job. Most consultants have rates based on characteristics of a forest property and what the owner wishes to accomplish. They might charge by the hour, the particular job, parcel size, or a percentage of timber sale income. Cost-share programs can offset expenses in some cases. Consultant fees are usually deductible from timber sale income.

Don't be afraid to ask a consultant about fees.

Most forest owners are happy with their decision to hire a consultant. The ranks of forestry consultants are growing across Michigan, indicating an increased demand for their services and, by assumption, that forest owners are satisfied with those services.

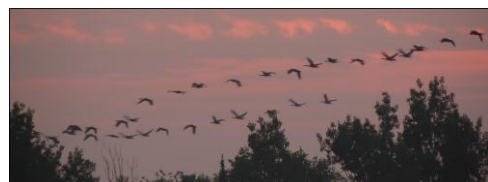
What About Agreements or Contracts?

Most simply put . . . get it in writing and make sure that you understand everything in the contract. This is a business venture. Good communication is the easiest and most effective way to avoid misunderstandings and mistakes. Ask questions. The consultant will expect questions. A good rapport with a consultant is quite important. A forest owner needs to feel comfortable asking tough questions and the consultant should be able to provide responses in a timely and understandable manner.



Agreements may begin with a letter of intent and graduate into a series of contracts. Alternatively, some services only need a single, fairly simple contract.

Forestry consultants (and logging contractors) are not out to cheat clients, although there is the occasional disreputable individual. Most of the difficult problems and arguments occur from misunderstandings. Many forestry practices involve a fairly standardized procedure. Be certain that you understand these procedures. If there is something that leaves you uneasy, ask about ways to modify the procedure. Do not assume that everyone thinks the same way. Have regular conversations with consultants and other people working on your forest land. The better you know each other, the clearer intentions will become, and the result will be better forest management.

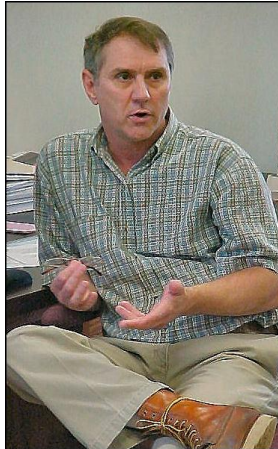


What Can Be Expected from Conversations with Consultants?

On top of the list are forest owner expectations. A consultant needs to know what an owner wants to see on their property and the reasons for ownership. That means an owner and their family members should have a discussion before talking to a consultant.

Goals and expectations do not necessarily need to be specific, and often are not. Details can be worked through with a consultant.

- Do you plan to own the property for a long time? Sell it in a particular year?
- Are family members going to inherit the property?
- Do you place different importance on different parcels?
- What kinds of wildlife are important to you? Do you hunt?
- How important is revenue for taxes, improvements, and other projects?
- Are you comfortable with the general idea of timber harvest? Why or why not?
- What sort of visual quality do you want in the years ahead?
- Are roads and trails important?
- Have you considered rare species? Invasive species? Sites or features that are special to you?
- Are government cost-share or property tax programs of interest?
- What level of pests, pathogens, and dying timber might you tolerate?



A forestry consultant will ask you these sorts of questions; not to be nosy but to better suggest elements of a forest management plan. If you already have a management plan, the consultant will ask for a copy for review. The plan will likely generate discussion and questions.

The consultant will need to know about any ownership issues, such as timber rights already sold, enrollment in tax programs, easements, and other factors that may affect scheduling of forest management activities.

At some point, records relating to the property will need to be made available, such as existing plans, deeds, maps, boundary

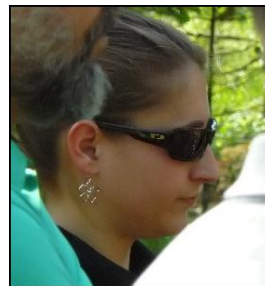
markers, plantation notes, past practices, etc. Forest stand histories can be important factors in decision-making.

Forest owners need to ask a prospective consultant a number of questions. These questions deal with scope of services, fees, schedules, availability, etc. Popular forestry consultants have full schedules. Larger jobs will probably take priority over smaller jobs. Knowing what, when, and how a consultant will assist a forest owner is important.

- Does the consultant provide all the services that you might be interested in? If not, how will those needs be met? Does the consultant regularly subcontract any of the work? What equipment might be needed and who owns the equipment?
- When can the consultant begin work? Season? Year? How long will certain practices take from beginning to end? Is the consultant full/part time? Do they have employees or partners?
- For timber sales, when is a good time to sell? What are the current markets like for different products? Does the consultant sense any market trends?
- Ask the consultant for references and contact them!
- What about insurance, bonding, and workers compensation? Does the forester cover injuries that might occur? Damages to infrastructure such as drain fields or bridges?
- How does the consultant define terms such as “sustainability” or “stewardship”? Are you satisfied with those definitions? What does the consultant claim as strengths? Weaknesses?
- Be sure to ask about expenses, fees, methods of payment, and other financial matters. Get these facts and options on the table early in the process.

Should You Hire A Consulting Forester?

For most forest owners, the answer is “yes”. The answer to this question depends largely on how important your forest is to you, and how familiar you are with forestry, forest ecology, and forest management practices. Few forest owners have the



professional forestry knowledge and expertise of a consultant. Foresters are experts in these topics. Forest owners willing to invest in their forest lands can expect many returns. Some people would argue that you cannot afford to *not* hire a consulting forester.



MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status.

MICHIGAN STATE | **Extension**
UNIVERSITY