

Choosing a Consulting Forester



A consulting forester helps the landowner prosper through efficient management of his or her forest resources. Although professionals from the Mississippi Forestry Commission and the Mississippi State University Extension Service provide professional forestry assistance, private consultants offer many additional benefits. Forestry consultants are particularly suited to conducting timber sales. This publication addresses some things to consider when choosing a consulting forester.

Property Ownership and Defining Objectives

It is important to make sure property ownership is clearly stated in the deed. Communally owned heir property, particularly a title in the name of someone who died long ago, has caused many problems throughout the South. Known as clouded title, the situation limits the economic value of the property and results in a greater risk that the property will be lost through a partitioned sale. In a partitioned sale, a co-owner does not need consent of the other heirs to force a court-ordered sale of the entire property.

Once ownership is clearly stated and understood, co-owners need to make a list of the activities each individual would like to accomplish on the property. After prioritizing these objectives, they should be integrated into a forest management plan. Well-defined landowner objectives and a detailed forest management plan are essential to responsible forest management.

Consulting Services

Because he or she is contracted by the landowner, the consultant is legally responsible for representing the landowner's best interests. A consultant evaluates the landowner's forest resources, provides sound technical advice, and helps the landowner optimize goals and objectives.

Consultants provide a variety of services for the landowner. Some of these include:

Management Services

- Inventory of resources
- Management plan preparation based on the landowner's objectives
- Marking timber for timber stand improvement or thinning to improve growth of remaining crop trees
- Layout and supervision of thinning sales of plantation and natural stands
- Timber sales
 - Laying out roads, log landings, and skid trails
 - Preparing the sales prospectus
 - Marketing the timber sale
 - Determining tax basis
 - Supervising and securing sales
 - Supervising logging and best management practices
 - Tracking timber sale payments
 - Ensuring proper timber sale close-out
- Determination of best regeneration method—natural or artificial
- Site preparation and planting supervision
- Contractor supervision: logging, site preparation, planting, prescribed burning, fertilization and/or herbicide application, wildlife habitat improvement

A number of consulting foresters also provide contracting services such as:

- Site preparation and planting
- Herbicide and fertilizer application
- Prescribed burning
- Timber cruising
- Wildlife habitat improvement

Some consultants provide the full range of services and are known as full-service consultants. Others only prepare and market timber sales but are still known as consulting foresters. Finally, foresters who are not members of the Association of Consulting Foresters may also be timber buyers. It is important that the landowner examine any possible conflict of interest.

An important point to remember is that marketing timber is a business decision. The majority of harvesting operations are responsible small businesses that follow the terms outlined in the harvesting contract. As a business, the harvesting operation seeks to optimize revenue just as the landowner does. In addition to keeping abreast of timber markets, regulations, and ecological issues, consultants and loggers in a particular area often know their respective quality of services. As a result, a consultant can help the landowner accomplish income objectives when communicating with loggers (DeCoster 1984).

To illustrate, a study by Munn and Franklin (1995) showed that pine sawtimber prices obtained by a consultant increased landowners' profits by up to 78 percent over non-consultant sales. The authors noted that, while greater wood volumes influenced consultant sales, "claims that greater returns for consultant sales result solely because of better tract characteristics were not supported" (page 28). There were no significant differences in prices obtained by consultants and non-consultants in pine and hardwood pulpwood and miscellaneous sawtimber sales.

Qualifications

In Mississippi, a consulting forester is a professional who has a college degree in forestry. Landowners should choose foresters who are certified and registered with the Mississippi Board of Registered Foresters (BORF). A list of current registered foresters by county can be found through the Mississippi State University Department of Forestry website, www.cfr.msstate.edu/borf. Certification means the forester has taken an exam testing his or her knowledge and skills. The consulting forester annually updates this knowledge through continuing education offered by professional associations and universities.

Using this website, the landowner should make a list of consultants who serve the county where the property is located as well as the adjacent counties. The landowner can call BORF to ask if complaints have been filed on any candidate. Forestry consultants can be identified using the phone book, the Internet, and classified ads. Like any other consumer service, landowners must take care to verify the forester's qualifications.

Another way to assess a consultant's qualifications is to check whether he or she is affiliated with a professional organization such as the Association of Consulting Foresters and/or the Society of American Foresters. These types of organizations enable foresters to learn the latest techniques and science relevant to forest management, forest health, existing and emerging markets, products, measurements, regulations, and other important topics.

Talking with other landowners is one of the best ways to find a qualified consultant. Nearly every forested county in Mississippi is associated with a County Forestry Association (CFA). CFAs are composed of landowners, consultants, timber buyers, individuals who work in the forest industry, and anyone else interested in forest topics. Such local organizations are the primary means of conducting forestry education and outreach programs to private forest landowners in Mississippi. These groups also allow landowners to share their forestry-related experiences.

Choosing the Consultant

Select a consultant you feel is trustworthy and one you feel comfortable with. A business relationship may work between one landowner and a consultant and not between another landowner and the same consultant. Choosing the right consultant can lead to a long-term, profitable relationship that lasts into future generations of a healthy forest.

Choosing a consultant is similar to choosing a lawyer or an accountant because you are entrusting them with a portion of your assets. Talk with other landowners and create a list of four to five candidates. Each candidate should then submit a resume, including documentation of professional experience, accreditation, and references. Make sure that forestry consulting is the candidate's principal business activity and that he or she will respect your objectives, concerns, and limitations. To this end, you should make a list of questions to ask each candidate, as well as questions to ask the candidate's personal references. It is a good idea to ask the candidate for a sample proposal in order to review his or her writing skills because this is important for clear communication between the consultant and the landowner.

After interviewing selected consultants, references should be randomly selected and called to ask about

their satisfaction with the consultant's work. The reference's forestland objectives should always be noted when discussing the consultant's quality of service because landowners' objectives can differ. Once the list of consultants is further narrowed down, the landowner may wish to ask for permission to visit the reference's property.

Contracts, Fees, and Payments

A written contract or a memorandum of agreement is necessary to confirm a business agreement. This agreement should include identification of the principal parties and statements about fees, obligations, and terms. Be sure you carefully read and understand the contract. It is always a good idea to have an attorney review the agreement, as well, to make you aware of every detail. If the chosen consultant does not work with contracts, you may write a letter to the consultant outlining the services agreed upon. The consultant should then sign and return the document.

Consultants may be paid in several ways. Consider the payment method carefully because it can affect the consultant's ability to provide you with information based on the changing conditions of the forest and the timber market. Payment can be made on a per-job, per-hour, per-day, or per-acre basis.

Some landowners pay a consulting forester a flat yearly fee to keep an eye out for the property and determine management needs. This is a practical method for absentee forest landowners with large acreages. Some people have the same consulting forester for more than 40 years.

Finally, payment can occur according to a percentage of the total volume or dollar amount of a timber sale. Full-service consulting foresters provide a "turn-key operation," handling inventory, marketing, timber sales, logging supervision, site preparation, tree planting, and regeneration supervision for 5–10 percent of the harvest sale. As stated earlier, some consulting foresters only sell timber and do not provide the sales and/or regeneration supervision. In any case, fees are negotiable, and the negotiated fee should reflect the amount of services agreed upon.

Acreage, First Thinning, and Final Harvest

Any landowner who has the objective of improving his or her forest conditions can hire a consulting forester. In general, landowners with more than 40 acres and those with high-value and high-volume timber on smaller acreages (about 10–20 acres) should consider working with a consulting forester. However, many landowners with small acreage properties find timber revenue does not justify the cost of a consulting forester. In such cases, the landowner may want to contract directly with a logging firm or timber buyer while also seeking advice from the county forester and Extension agent.

Landowners often ask if it is necessary to use a consulting forester for the first thinning. Employing a consulting forester for the first thinning may not result in significantly more revenue than if you had contracted a thinning operation yourself, and could result in less revenue (Munn and Franklin 1995). However, the present value of the first thinning is only about 7 percent of the total revenue during the life of the timber, with about 80 percent occurring during the final harvest. This means poor first and second thinnings can have enormous ecological and economic risks in terms of future stand productivity.

Conclusion

Forest management is not to be taken lightly. The way you manage your forest will greatly determine the amount of revenue and the length of time to harvest age. A consulting forester can help you become aware of your options and make decisions to successfully achieve your objectives while maintaining the productivity of the forest. Choose your consultant carefully.

Summary: 7 Steps to Choosing a Consulting Forester

1. Determine if a full-service consulting forester—a professional who covers all aspects of forest management—or a limited-service consulting forester is best for your particular situation.
2. Make sure the individual is a registered forester. Using the list of registered consulting foresters provided by BORF (available online at www.cfr.msstate.edu/borf), make a list of all the consulting foresters in the county and surrounding areas.
3. Join the local County Forestry Association. Attending association meetings is a good way to obtain firsthand referrals for a consulting forester.
4. Make sure the consulting forester's registration is current by contacting BORF. Be sure to ask if any complaints have been filed on any candidate.
5. Ask the same set of questions to each candidate during the interview process. Request references, and call those references.
6. Obtain quotes from at least three forestry consultants before hiring anyone.
7. Make the decision to hire a consultant based on reputation, services provided, experience, and personality fit.

Resources

Mississippi State University Extension county directors and Extension foresters

Mississippi Forestry Commission foresters

Mississippi Board of Registration of Foresters, <http://www.cfr.msstate.edu/borf/>

Association of Consulting Foresters, <http://www.acf-foresters.com>

Society of American Foresters, <http://www.safnet.org>
Radio commentaries and publications on MSUcares.com

Managing the Family Forest in Mississippi, Extension Publication 2470, Department of Forestry, Mississippi State University

Humphries Jr., W.C. 1997. Consulting Foresters: Choosing Carefully. *Forest Landowner* 56(2):86-88.

DeCoster, L. 1984. "Is a consulting forester worth the fee? Note from a phantom forester." *The American Tree Farmer*, 1(3): 15.

Munn, I.A. and E.C. Franklin. 1995. "Do Consultants Really Generate Higher Timber Prices?" *The Consultant*, 40(1):26-29.

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