

Choosing a Consulting Forester

The job of a consulting forester is to help landowners efficiently manage their forest resources. Although professionals from the Mississippi Forestry Commission and Mississippi State University Extension can provide professional forestry advice, 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 land deeds. Communally owned heir property, particularly when titled in the name of a deceased person, has caused many problems throughout the South. Known as *clouded title*, the situation can limit property value and often results in property divisions through a partitioned sale. In a partitioned sale, a co-owner does not need consent of 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 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

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

Management Services

Consultants provide a variety of services, including the following:

- ▶ Inventory of resources
- ▶ Management plan preparation based on the landowner's objectives
- ▶ Marking timber for management efforts
- ▶ Layout and supervision of thinning sales of forest stands
- ▶ Timber sales
 - Planning roads, log landings, and skid trails
 - Preparing the sales prospectus
 - Marketing timber
 - Determining tax basis
 - Supervising and securing sales
 - Supervising logging and best management practices
 - Tracking timber sale payments
 - Ensuring proper close-out after timber sales
- ▶ Determining best regeneration method—natural or artificial
- ▶ Site preparation and planting supervision
- ▶ Supervision for all management activities contracted out

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

- ▶ Site preparation and planting
- ▶ Herbicide and fertilizer application
- ▶ Prescribed burning
- ▶ Timber cruising and marking
- ▶ Wildlife habitat improvement
- ▶ Writing management plans

Some consultants provide the full range of services and are known as full-service or turn-key consultants. Others only prepare and market timber sales but are still known as consulting foresters. Finally, foresters sometimes may also be timber buyers. It is important that landowners 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 terms outlined in the harvesting contract. As a business, harvesters seek to maximize revenue just as landowners do. In addition to keeping abreast of timber markets, regulations, and ecological issues, consultants in a particular area often know the service quality of local harvesting operations. As a result, a consultant can help landowners accomplish income objectives by selecting and communicating with loggers appropriate to the type of sale at hand. Studies have shown landowners' profits to increase by as much as 78 percent when comparing consultant-driven sales to non-consultant sales.

Qualifications

In Mississippi, a consulting forester is a professional who has a bachelor's degree in forestry. Landowners should choose foresters who are registered with the Mississippi Board of Registration for Foresters (BORF). Find a list of current registered foresters at <https://www.borf.ms.gov/>. This database is searchable by county, city, and forester name. Registration means the forester has taken an exam testing his or her knowledge and skills. The forester has to prove every two years that he or she is maintaining this knowledge through continuing education credits offered by professional associations and universities.

Using this website, landowners can obtain a list of consultants serving the county where the property is located as well as adjacent counties. The landowner can call BORF to ask if complaints have been filed on any candidate. Like any other consumer service, landowners must take care to verify foresters' qualifications.

Talking with other landowners is one of the best ways to find a qualified consultant. Nearly every county in Mississippi is associated with a County Forestry Association (CFA). CFAs are composed of landowners, consultants, timber buyers, individuals who work in the forestry industry, and anyone else interested in forestry topics. These groups also allow landowners to share 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 lasting into future generations.

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. 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 a candidate's references. It is a good idea to ask for a sample proposal in order to review the consultant's writing skills because this is important for clear communication.

After talking with selected consultants, feel free to ask for two or three references. Consultants work by reputation and, as such, should willingly give you contact information for a few personal references. Call these references and 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 landowner objectives can differ. Once the list of consultants is further narrowed down, a landowner may wish to ask for permission to visit the reference's property to observe work quality.

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. If the chosen consultant does not typically work with contracts, you may write a letter 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 changing forest and timber market conditions. 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 on the property and determine management needs. This is a practical

and important option for absentee forest landowners with large acreages.

Finally, payment can occur as a percentage of total volume or dollar amount of a timber sale. Typically, full-service consulting foresters provide a “turn-key operation,” handling inventory, marketing, timber sales, logging supervision, site preparation, tree planting, and regeneration supervision for 10–15 percent of the harvest sale. Of note, with depressed timber markets as of 2023, some sales (e.g., first-thin pine sales, small-acreage sales, sales far from appropriate mills, etc.) will dictate higher percentages than traditionally encountered. In some cases these commissions are as high as 25 percent of sale value. As stated earlier, some consulting foresters only sell timber and do not provide 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 their forest conditions can hire a consulting forester. In general, landowners with more than 40 acres and those with high-value or high-volume timber on smaller acreages (20–40 acres) should consider working with a consulting forester. However, many landowners with small properties find timber revenue does not justify the cost of employing a consulting forester. In such cases, the landowner may wish to contract directly with a logging firm or timber buyer while also seeking advice from the local Mississippi Forestry Commission area forester and/or 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 greater 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 wood cut in the first thin is typically only about 7 percent of total revenue during a rotation of timber, with about 80 percent occurring during final harvest. This means poor first and second thinnings can have enormous ecological and economic risks in terms of future stand productivity.

Summary: 6 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 foresters provided by BORF (<https://www.borf.ms.gov/>), make a list of consulting foresters in the county and surrounding areas.
3. Join your local County Forestry Association. Attending association meetings is a good way to get firsthand referrals for a consulting forester.
4. Make sure a consulting forester’s registration is current by contacting BORF. Be sure to ask if any complaints have been filed on any candidate.
5. Ask each of your candidates pertinent questions. Request references, and call those references.
6. Make the decision to hire a consultant based on reputation, services provided, experience, and personality fit.

Conclusion

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

Resources

Mississippi State University Extension agents and Extension foresters

Mississippi Forestry Commission area foresters

Mississippi Board of Registration for Foresters: <https://www.borf.ms.gov/>

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

Society of American Foresters: <https://www.eforester.org/>

Mississippi State University Extension: <http://extension.msstate.edu/>

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

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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