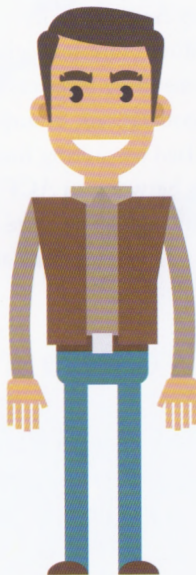




Retaining a forestry professional can be a landowner's best move. The key is to check credentials and find the one best suited for your needs.

By Tres Hyman and Thomas Straka



When it comes to choosing a forester, one size does not fit all. Given the individualized nature of a forest property in terms of management goals, it can be a challenge to identify and hire the proper professional.

Forestry commission foresters and extension agents provide valuable free advice. While the price is right, public service foresters tend to give only a cursory examination of woodlands and generic recommendations for forest management. Many landowners seek a more thorough review of the property and a more in-depth report.

A second common source of information for forest landowners comes from "procurement foresters." These folks can be professional foresters or amateur timber buyers. The allegiances of both types of procurement foresters generally lay with the company that signs their paycheck, and their forestry advice can be biased toward the goal of buying a landowner's timber.

Most procurement foresters and timber buyers are honest and they form an essential part of the supply chain of getting timber to the mills. However, due to the nature of the relationship, it is



difficult for a buyer also to serve the interest of a seller in a timber transaction.

When forest owners need more specific recommendations and analysis of their woodlands, and they want a forester who will protect their business interests in expensive site preparation and reforestation operations or revenue-generating timber sales, they often look to the business-oriented consulting forester. Just like there are various types of professional foresters, there are different types of consulting foresters. Forest landowners need to know what to look for when considering the investment in consulting forester services.

WHAT IS A CONSULTING FORESTER?

Consulting foresters manage forests and market forest products for private woodland owners. They represent and protect the forest landowner's interests. The landowner is principal, and the consultant is the landowner's agent.

A consultant's services cannot be free; they operate a business and charge for services, usually on a fee basis (hourly, per acre, or a percentage of timber sales revenue). This establishes a client relationship and the expectation that they always will represent the best interests of the forest owner. A consulting forester works for the forest owner, not a government agency or a wood-using mill. Forestry is a business for many forest owners and hiring a professional forester makes good business sense, especially in negotiating and supervising timber sales, and guiding management so that your forest produces the desired return.

Many forest landowners associate consulting foresters with timber sales. After all, two of the most common tasks they are hired for are determining the volume of merchantable timber on a tract before harvest and then determining the value of that timber. However, this is just one aspect of the services offered by consulting foresters.

CREDENTIALS

Consulting foresters can have a variety of credentials. Some of the highest standards involve membership in the Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF). The ACF has educational and experience qualifications, requires course work in the practice of consulting forestry, and maintains high ethical standards.

An ACF member's principal business will be forestry consulting and he or she is not allowed to have an economic interest in a timber purchasing or procurement entity. The ACF website provides a menu to look up member foresters within each state. The Society of American Foresters (SAF) offers credentialing as a Certified Forester (CF) and this also assures educational and experience qualifications. Certified foresters are allowed to self-identify as consultants and the SAF website will produce a list of CF consultants within a state.

Forester licensing and registration laws exist in 16 states, providing a registered forester (RF) credential. Often the registration boards will identify RFs that offer consulting services. State professional associations of consulting foresters also exist (i.e. the Minnesota Association of Consulting Foresters and the Missouri Consulting Foresters Association).

Many states, with and without forester registration or licensing laws, offer lists of consulting foresters maintained by state agencies, state forestry associations, or university extension organizations. Hiring a qualified consulting forester requires understanding the differences between an ACF member, CF, and RF. Additionally, many consulting foresters are also licensed real estate brokers, real estate appraisers, and some are professional land surveyors.

ADVANTAGES OF A CONSULTING FORESTER

Why pay for a consulting forester when there are cheaper options? Timber sales involve significant money and mishandling a sale can cost the landowner money. Even timber sales handled by the



Forester Kea Turner shows third-generation forest landowner Lance Williams recent developments at property in Windsor, Va.

forest landowners themselves can incur a hidden “fee” in the form of selling below market value. Most consultants are reluctant to point out this loss to a landowner after-the-fact because most forest owners are proud of the timber business transaction they just completed on their own, and the money they saved by doing it themselves.

By paying a consultant upfront, a landowner has the piece of mind of having a trained professional handling the transaction. Consultants are specialists at marketing timber sales, accurately estimating timber volume and value, administering a timber sale, and supervising the logging operation. Their involvement makes it more likely the landowner will get market value for timber.

More importantly, forestry consultants work with the landowner to develop the forest resource management plan, including establishment of the landowner’s management

objectives. This is the document and planning that guides the landowner’s future forest for maximum benefit. There are advantages to being a fee-paying client of an independent professional. Other types of foresters seldom offer the array of services available from a consultant.

Consulting foresters are representatives of the forest landowner in dealing with site preparation, tree planting and herbicide/fertilization contractors. They are longtime members of the forestry community and know how to negotiate for and manage services. Forest landowners should expect them to make purchases in the most cost-effective manner while ensuring the greatest future forest productivity. Likewise, consulting foresters know the local loggers and how to work with them to get the forest landowner top dollar at timber harvest time.



CONSIDERATIONS IN HIRING A CONSULTING FORESTER

Like forest landowners, consulting foresters come in many forms, from sole proprietors that serve small regions, to larger multi-state and international firms. Smaller firms can't provide all of the services of a larger firm, but smaller firms often provide more access to small owners. The size and scale of the management task at hand will define the size of consulting firm needed.

Besides the independence already discussed, what should a forest landowner look for in a consulting forester? First, the educational background should include a B.S. in forestry from an accredited program (or equivalent master's degree). Experience is important, both as a forester and as a forestry consultant. SAF, ACF, and RF credentials guarantee minimum experience as a forester. Most consulting foresters emphasize professional standards and value their reputations among clients and colleagues. Forest landowners should feel comfortable asking them for references. Membership in professional societies is telling.

Geography also comes into play; consulting foresters often limit their practice to a specific area. Generally, for small woodland owners, it is a good idea to employ a consultant within a few hours driving time of your woodlands.

Not all forestry consultants are created alike. It can be difficult to understand the differences between Registered Foresters, procurement foresters, timber buyers, Certified Foresters, and consulting foresters; not even all RFs are graduate foresters due to lax state laws. Credentials matter and the forest landowner ought to understand them. The landowner needs to start with the standard questions on references, insurance, reliability, and professional background.

Forestry consultants also specialize. Certain consultants have specialized skills in practices dealing with hardwoods, longleaf pine, forest taxation, or water quality problems. Forest owners with specialized concerns often will do best in locating a consultant that specializes in that concern. Also keep in mind the important caveat stressed above; another



way consultants differ is independence, impacting loyalty to the forest owner.

WHAT DOES IT COST?

There are no set fees for consultant-provided services. Many consultants work on an hourly rate basis for general services and a commission basis for timber sales. Forest inventory work often is based on a per acre basis.

Rates vary widely between consultants and for any particular consultant based on the size of the job, the value of timber being sold, and complexity of the task. For example, the sales commission rate on a 20-acre pulpwood thinning is likely to be higher than on a 100-acre clear-cut because of the economy of scale. The hourly rate for supervision of reforestation is likely to be less than the hourly rate of growth-and-yield modeling or expert court testimony preparation. Per acre timber inventory rates likely will be higher on 30 acres than on 300 acres, again due to economy of scale.

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While there are no set fees for consultants, a landowner might generally expect to pay in the range of 5 to 12 percent sale commission on the gross timber sale proceeds for turnkey timber sale services. This commission includes inventory/marketing of the timber being sold, solicitation of bids, supervision of cutting operations, and reforestation supervision.

Hourly rates for services generally fall in the \$75 to \$150 range in the southeastern United States, but can vary widely. Forest inventory rates likely will be in the \$10 to \$20 per acre range. In those instances where a consultant is also a real estate broker, some forestry service fees could be combined with a real estate commission, but generally these fees are separate.

Studies have shown timber sales negotiated and managed by a forestry consultant often produce extra revenue over and above the consulting fee. The forest management planning provided by the consultant should increase forest productivity and future forest yields. The benefit provided by a forestry consultant can be expected to exceed the cost. The bottom line in fees is that there are no standard rates and fees are always subject to negotiation. Quality forestry work can seem expensive. But beware that cheap mediocre work can cost you more in the long run.

Timber is such a unique commodity that most people have no idea of its value. They know what their homes and cars are worth, and would not think of selling those things for below market value, which is why they consult professionals, along with online resources.

Remember: there is no free lunch. Someone is paying for each forest subsidy, each “free” seedling, and each free site visit by a public forester.

Never let the buyer also be the appraiser. You get what you pay for, and you often pay for what you do not get, especially in the case of not paying for an appraisal before selling your timber.

Your woodlands are valuable. Professional forestry advice on how to manage your forest is valuable, and forest management services are valuable. There should be no expectation that forest management is free any more than attorney, car repair or medical services are free. ■

Tres Hyman, ACF, is a consulting forester in Florence, South Carolina and Thomas Straka is a forestry professor at Clemson University.

