



## Should you hire a consulting forester?

by Georgia Peterson,  
MSU Extension &  
MDNR Forest, Mineral & Fire Management Division

Consulting foresters are self-employed professional foresters. They provide a wide range of services to private landowners, industry, and governmental agencies. Services consulting foresters provide include timber sale marking and administration, forest stand improvement and marking, management plan development, wildlife management, Christmas tree management, tree disease and insect control, tree planting, timber appraisal, investment analysis, demonstrations, and forest taxation advice.

Consultants' fees vary, and can be based on a percentage, commission, job rate, hourly rate, retainer, or a combination of these. In many cases, the cost of a consultant can be offset. For example, their fees may be deductible on income taxes as a management operating expense during the year the expense occurred (Potter-Witter, 1989). Additionally, several federal programs provide some cost-sharing assistance for having a management plan written, or conducting particular activities on your forestland. Contact your local Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Michigan State University Extension, or Conservation District office for more information on these programs.

### Meeting natural resource management needs

Three commonly occurring needs—management planning, forest stand improvement and timber sales—are addressed by most consulting foresters.

Before conducting any forest management activity on your property, consider having a management plan created. A management plan is a document that defines your goals for the property, outlines the current conditions of your forest, and provides a timetable of detailed strategies or actions that can be conducted to reach those goals. A consulting forester can lead you through the planning process, conduct the forest inventory, and make recommendations on how to meet your forestland goals.

Forest improvement involves removing undesirable trees and/or thinning a forest stand to improve the condition of the remaining trees. Forests that have been treated properly can improve wildlife habitat, recreation, biodiversity, forest health, and future timber values. Correctly improving a forest requires the ability to identify and assess relative values, growth characteristics, site potential and growth requirements of various tree species. Most consulting foresters have this knowledge through their experience and educational background.

Selling timber is often an unfamiliar activity for landowners. A consulting forester can provide valuable assistance. Without good forestry assistance, many woodlots are improperly cut and sold at prices far lower than their true market value. This is primarily due to the woodland owner's lack of timber sale knowledge. Competitive bidding is the best way to sell timber and

bids usually vary substantially. It is not uncommon for bids from different timber buyers on the same trees to vary by thousands of dollars. The consulting forester can help a landowner achieve a fair market price while leaving the stand in a healthy condition for the future.

Consulting foresters can prepare the necessary contracts, send out bid notices to reliable timber buyers, help determine which bid to accept, and administer the timber sale. Administering the sale should involve inspecting the logging of your woodlot to minimize cutting and skidding damage, develop proper road and landings, and cut only marked trees. It should also ensure that the woodlot is left in the condition specified in the contract. It is important that the proper trees be harvested so that the woodlot is improved and remains a valuable asset in the future.

When considering hiring any professional to do work for you, there are several questions to ask. What management activities is the consultant qualified to conduct? About how much time will a proposed job require? What are the estimated costs of the work? Does the consultant have appropriate insurance in case of damage to property or injuries? Also, be sure to ask for a list of references from previous clients, and contact these references to ask about their level of satisfaction with the forester's costs, timeliness and reliability.

Remember the consulting forester is working for *you*. Be as clear as possible about your goals and values for your forested land. What are your primary interests in your woodlot? The forester needs to know. With this information, proper management planning and operations can help you achieve your goals.

## **References**

Potter-Witter, Karen. 1989. Can I deduct forest management costs on my income taxes? Forestry Fact Sheet 15, MSU Department of Forestry, East Lansing, MI.