



## Brownfields Resources

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# Steps in Choosing an Environmental Consultant

Skills, experience, and track records of consultants vary widely. Hiring an appropriate and qualified environmental consultant is crucial in developing solutions that are protective of human health and the environment, in compliance with environmental regulations, and cost-effective. Benefits include the following:

- saving time and money;
- completing projects satisfactorily the first time;
- maintaining good relationships with regulatory agencies;
- submitting deliverables in a timely fashion;
- satisfying all parties involved with the final outcome; and
- minimizing unexpected contingencies.

The following steps are intended to help you choose the right consultant for your project.

**STEP 1: Determine scope of work.** Providing as much information as possible will enable prospective firms to give you more accurate estimates (cost and time) for completing the project. Especially, when you own the property and/or are familiar with it, the process will be facilitated if you compile all the information you have about the property including current and historical operations at and around the site, potential sources of contamination, existing maps, and company records on where and how hazardous substances have been used and/or stored. The environmental consultant can research these items, too; however, it may take more time and effort. Often, you will be much more familiar with the property in question and its history than the consultant will ever be – because you have information that may not be recorded in any of the documents available to the consultant. Communicate this information, it will save you money.

What is the work that needs to be done by an environmental professional and what should the result of the work be? Outline a scope of work as best as you can. Having a good understanding of the situation and what needs to be done will assist in determining the best consultant for the project. If you are unsure about what needs to be done at your site and how you should proceed, get help. Environmental

state agencies will provide guidance\* as will the Technical Assistance to Brownfields communities (TAB) program at Kansas State University. Keep in mind that environmental investigations often encounter unexpected situations and new information that may change the scope of work.

**STEP 2: Compile a list of possible firms.** Make a list of potential consulting firms that have conducted similar investigations, cleanups, or have performed other services you require. Check with state regulatory agencies (often states maintain a consultants list but will not endorse any firm), professional societies or directories, and trade organizations; and interview environmental attorneys. Contact other companies in your industry, or other municipalities, who have used environmental consultants before.

Once you have names of companies, check the Internet or contact the firms directly to obtain general information on the respective companies – their staff, experience, and services provided. If your list is long, use the obtained general information and recommendations you may have received to narrow your search.

**STEP 3: Request proposals.** Send a request for proposals (RFP) to consultants that appear qualified. You probably want to send RFPs to more than five companies but to no more than 10, although there is no general rule. Your goal is to get at least three proposals back for the work you need done. If you are writing an RFP for a local government, or have an EPA grant to do the project work, there may be requirements for the way bids are handled. Review and follow the required bid process for your organization. The RFP should include the following information:

- description of the site, including maps and diagrams, if available;
- discussion of the scope of the project and expected deliverables;
- preferences or requirements regarding assessment approaches, data quality, and reporting requirements;
- time constraints for completing the work;

- directions for access to relevant records (such as previous environmental work) and to the site for bidders;
- request for a statement of qualifications of the consulting firm and staff resumes;
- request for references;
- request for unit rates and cost estimates (itemization of costs will allow you to compare proposals better);
- directions for submitting proposals and project contact(s);
- criteria that will be used for review and selection of proposals;
- time and date for a pre-bid meeting to answer questions; and
- information on general requirements for the work (i.e. Davis Bacon, MWBD – minority and women-owned business development).

The TAB program at Kansas State University can furnish examples of RFPs upon request.

**STEP 4: Review proposals.** When reviewing proposals, keep in mind the following:

- Has the firm worked on projects similar to yours?
- How much work does the company subcontract, and who are the subcontractors?
- Is the consultant knowledgeable about federal, state, and local environmental laws and policies?
- How well does the consultant communicate in writing?
- Beware of bids that are significantly lower than those of competing firms, and overly optimistic time schedules. Be wary of “hard sell” approaches, conflicts of interest, or anything that makes you feel uneasy.
- If something in the proposal is unclear to you, ask.
- Is the company insured and if necessary, bonded?
- Is the company currently involved or has it ever been involved in law suits regarding its work performance?

**STEP 5: Contact references.** If you are not familiar with the reputation of the consulting firm, checking references can be one of the most important parts of the selection process. The following are some questions you may want to ask references:

- Were you satisfied with the consultant’s work?
- Did you have any concerns about the firm’s performance or fees?
- What specific staff members were on your project team?
- Was the project completed on time and within budget?
- Were you kept informed as the project progressed?
- Did you encounter unexpected delays or staff turnover?

- Were these or any other problems resolved to your satisfaction?
- Did the consultant work effectively with regulatory staff, local officials, and you?

**STEP 6: Prepare a short list and conduct interviews.**

Once you have identified the most qualified consulting firms, arrange for interviews. The interviews may be used to clarify any unclear items in the consultant’s proposal and evaluate the consultant’s qualifications in more depth. Some example questions to ask during the interview may include the following:

- Who will be assigned to the project? Are any of these people at the interview? What is the training and experience of project team members?
- Will the assigned project team be available at the time the project is supposed to start and will the team be available for the duration of the project?
- What is the project team members’ knowledge of federal, state, and local environmental regulations and policies?
- What tasks will be subcontracted and to whom? What is the subcontractor’s experience with similar projects? How will subcontracted service be charged?
- Does the consultant have an established field protocol and chain-of-custody procedure with associated SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) for sampling?
- What is the consultant’s current workload?
- What percentage of projects (on average) did the company complete within time and budget constraints?

**STEP 7: Make the selection.** The knowledge you have collected through the consulting firm’s submitted proposal, reference checks, and the interview should provide enough information to select a consultant. By researching a firm, you will get a sense for its honesty, technical competence, and ability to save you time, money, and stress.

\*A listing with associated contact information for environmental state agencies can be obtained at <http://www.smarter.org> (go to “Links” on the top toolbar).

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