

Getting Your Money's Worth from an Environmental Site Assessment

Few people shop for environmental site assessment services on a regular basis. So when you do need one, how do you get one that serves your needs? It's not as simple as it seems. Take a few minutes to explain what you need and ask for suggestions. Open communication is one of the real keys to getting what you need. A good consultant will explain the assessment process, its objectives and its limitations. You may wish to consider the following suggestions:

1. What are your needs? Site assessments are performed for various purposes. The purpose of the assessment is up to the client, not the consultant. Is the primary purpose to identify potential environmental liabilities or limitations, to satisfy a lender's due diligence requirements, provide an estimate of remedial costs and liabilities, or is it to be the basis for future remedial actions? In many cases, the assessment has multiple purposes. Identifying your needs is a critical first step toward designing the most appropriate assessment tool for your project. While all assessments contain common elements, it is usually necessary to tailor the individual scope of services to satisfy the client's specific needs, budget and/or time constraints.

The scope of each assessment should be developed by an experienced environmental consultant, in direct consultation with the client. Beware of "one size fits all" assessments that are not tailored to address the user's specific needs.

2. Conformance with established standards may not be enough. While conformance with established standards (such as ASTM E1527-00) should be the minimum

requirement for a good assessment, additional inquiries are often (if not usually) necessary to evaluate "non-CERCLA" risks, to address state-specific requirements, to address the additional requirements of lenders, and/or to simply verify questionable information, fill data gaps or resolve other discrepancies. In most cases, it is necessary to go beyond the default standards. This is particularly true when the assessment is being performed for multiple purposes or is to be used by multiple parties. And while the standards typically specify what types of information must be collected, they provide little guidance with regard to interpreting and validating that information. These steps are crucial to developing the conclusions and recommendations on which the user will rely. The client should feel confident that the consultant has the expertise and experience to properly evaluate the data (not to merely collect it), and will go beyond the minimum requirements if necessary to ensure the assessment is comprehensive and useful.

3. Do you understand the findings? An assessment report must be clearly written and presented in a form that is readily understandable by all users. This is not an easy task when communicating complex environmental issues to users with diverse (and often non-technical) backgrounds. Assessment reports should be written in "plain English," with a minimum of jargon, acronyms and highly technical terms.

While they must contain complete and accurate technical documentation, their findings and conclusions must be readily understandable to individuals with no technical or environmental experience. The

reports must identify data gaps and deficiencies (preferably with recommendations as to how to resolve them), and clearly communicate any degree of uncertainty in the data. Satisfying all of these requirements in a clear, concise manner is a true art form.

4. Gaining extra value from the assessment.

While an assessment is typically performed to satisfy specific objectives, it often has extra benefits. It may alert the client to potential future liabilities. It may be used to access "hidden" financial resources (such as "tank fund" reimbursement, state or federal Brownfields assistance, or HUD CDBG funding). An experience consultant will often identify conditions and issues during the assessment that are outside the assessment's scope, but which may be of great value to the client. In many cases, a major hidden value of the assessment is simply the opportunity to speak candidly with an experience environmental professional (whether the discussion is about the assessment at hand or other environmental concerns). By keeping an open channel of communication with the consultant, the client can often receive added value from the assessment.

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