

Working with Recovery Vendors: What You Should Know

After a disaster happens, it's human nature to want things to return to normal as quickly as possible. Don't let those feelings affect your ability to vet disaster recovery vendors because ultimately, you want the best for your family treasures or institution's collections. If you follow these steps, you will be more in control of the situation and will feel more confident working with a vendor. These suggestions apply to your family home as well as a cultural institution.

Step 1: Ask Questions. Lots of Questions.

- 1. How long have you been in business?**
Try to find a company that has been in business at least five years. Also, find one that holds industry certifications and belongs to professional associations. Be aware that companies vary from location to location, even those with a recognizable name.
- 2. Which drying techniques do you use?**
There is more than one way to dry things; ask which services they offer, how they work, and what results to expect. If objects cannot be dried within 48 hours, you can freeze many types of materials to buy time and secure funding. You can learn more about various drying techniques from this National Archives and Record Administration document: <https://www.archives.gov/files/preservation/records-emergency/pdf/drying-techniques.pdf>
- 3. How do you treat for mold/bacteria/viruses/parasites?**
In water disasters, all four things are of concern; ask which services they offer, how they work, and what results to expect. Gamma irradiation, for example, will kill mold, but might cause long-term damage to some organic materials, like paper.
- 4. Can the work be done in place, or do the materials need to go offsite?**
Sometimes the work can be done with the materials in place; sometimes it will need to be inventoried, packed, and sent offsite.
- 5. Who will be my point-of-contact?**
A project manager should be assigned to your case who will meet with you onsite and serve as your point-of-contact throughout the project.

6. **Can you give me at least three references?**

A reputable company stands by its work and should be able to provide three references without hesitation.

7. **What security measures do you use?**

There should be security protocols in place to protect your possessions, regardless of where they are processed. Ask what tracking methods they use to monitor your materials as they go through the facility, or their security protocols if working on site.

8. **Do you use third-party vendors?**

Ask if they will be sending your materials to other parties for treating materials. You will need to vet those third parties as well. Ask for the qualifications of other parties, especially those who are calling themselves conservators or restorers.

9. **Do you use temporary or permanent staff?**

Companies sometimes will hire temporary staff who do not have sufficient training or expertise. If they do, ask about their security screening methods and request that a supervisor with at least several years' experience with the company be onsite at all times.

Step 2: Ask for written documentation outlining their methods and practices.

Before the work starts, it is crucial that you and the vendor mutually agree and understand expectations. A Scope of Work or Project Plan document is helpful for this as it will outline the work to be completed and how it will be conducted.

Step 3: Insurance.

It is important to check your insurance policy to see if it will cover this emergency. Some insurance may insist that you use their vendor for recovery, for example, or may not cover materials that are taken offsite.

Step 4: Contractual Agreement.

The Scope of Work or Project Plan should be the basis for the contract that you and the vendor sign so that each party is protected.

Collecting institutions affected by an emergency event should contact the National Heritage Responders for additional response advice: 202.661.8068 or nhr@conservation-us.org