



## Terra Firma Landscape Uses ProEst® Estimating to Cut Material Costs by 3% and Gain a Competitive Advantage in a Challenging Construction Market

### The Challenge

Terra Firma Landscape is an award-winning landscape design-build construction firm located in San Diego, CA, that serves the private development, commercial development, public works and residential markets. In addition to landscaping, the company also performs concrete, masonry, grading, paving and swimming pool work, and uses in-house personnel for all facets of project and service delivery. Founded in 1976, Terra Firma regularly receives top recognition by organizations such as the California Building Industry Association (CBIA) and the California Landscape Contractors Association (CLCA) for its outstanding design-build projects and landscaping achievements.

Since Terra Firma manages multiple disciplines and trades under one roof, project estimates typically include a complex mix of labor, equipment and materials. “A single estimate might have concrete, landscape and irrigation,” explains Terra Firma Founder and President, Larry Swikard, “and each one of those elements represents 1,000 or more components.” Although the company had been using spreadsheets for estimating, it was time for a change. “Our spreadsheets were good tools for generating generic project prices, but they weren’t good tools for managing jobs because our estimates didn’t have any details.”

Terra Firma wanted to increase efficiency and improve project management by bringing detailed estimate data into its accounting system for budgeting, purchasing and other purposes. To accomplish this, the company needed a database-driven estimating program.

### The Solution

In 1994, Terra Firma purchased ProEst Estimating software. “At the time,” Swikard recalls, “ProEst was the

### At-A-Glance

#### Company:

Terra Firma Landscape Co.  
San Diego, CA  
Specialty Subcontracting (Landscape Design-Build Construction)  
Founded in 1976  
Number of employees: 200+  
Number of estimates each year: 400+

#### Challenge:

To find a database-driven estimating program that supports custom assemblies and crews, and integrates with ComputerEase accounting software.

#### Solution:

ProEst Estimating

#### Results:

- > Integration with ComputerEase automates job setup and improves job costing
- > Better control over purchasing reduces material costs by 3%
- > Custom field reports eliminate days of manual information gathering
- > Estimate-to-actual cost comparisons improve estimate accuracy to provide a competitive advantage
- > Digital takeoffs reduce estimate creation time by 50% and eliminate associated printing costs
- > Responsive customer service delivers significant ‘time is money’ value

only solution we found that was flexible enough to let us build the custom assembly components and crews needed to support our unique business model.”

Another reason why Terra Firma chose ProEst was the software developer’s willingness to invest time and money to strengthen the link between its estimating program and the landscape company’s accounting software. “We wanted ProEst to integrate seamlessly with our ComputerEase accounting software,” Swikard says, “and today, that integration really is seamless.”

## The Results

Several years have gone by since Terra Firma purchased ProEst, and the software has become a vital tool for

**When Terra Firma is awarded a project, they push one button in ProEst and the job is automatically setup in Computerease, along with detailed labor and material components from ProEst.**

creating the company’s 35–40 monthly estimates that generate new work – and for managing jobs.

“This is a huge benefit for our purchasing department because they know exactly what they need to buy,” Swikard says. “We simply generate a material list in ComputerEase and send that out for bid. Nobody is manually creating budgets or purchasing lists anymore, or buying materials that aren’t in the budget.”

Better control over purchasing has improved the company’s bottom line. Before Terra Firma had ProEst, material costs on projects averaged 38 percent of the sales price. “Once ProEst was integrated with ComputerEase,” Swikard reports, “that number dropped to 35 percent or less. In 2006, when our annual revenues peaked at \$18M, that three percent cost savings totaled more than \$500K. That’s a significant amount of money.”

The field staff has benefitted too, thanks to custom reports that ProEst wrote for Terra Firma that give jobsite foremen detailed labor, equipment and material breakdowns. “It used to take someone days to manually assemble this information in a job folder,” Swikard states. “Now, with just a few keystrokes, we print three

reports that give our field teams everything they need to manage their jobs.”

By using ProEst and ComputerEase together, Terra Firma has improved job cost tracking, and gained an early warning system for correcting problems before they become costly. And the historical perspective of comparing estimated costs to actual costs has helped the company improve estimate accuracy. “Knowing what your true costs are going to be allows you to be a price leader, which is extremely important in the current economic climate,” Swikard says.

“Although setting up our initial ProEst database took time up front, that effort continues to pay off,” Swikard continues. “ProEst is only as good as the data you put into it, so spend some time entering quality information and organizing your data,” he recommends. “If you do, ProEst will help you analyze your data to determine how to be more competitive in this environment. And that’s something you just can’t do with a spreadsheet.”

## Digital Takeoffs Save Time and Money

When the construction industry went from boom to bust, Terra Firma’s peak revenues dropped by over 50 percent, and the company looked for new sources of work. “In the downsized economy,” Swikard explains, “we found ourselves bidding on a lot of public works projects.” The problem was, other contractors were doing the same, which increased competition. While Terra Firma wins about 60 percent of its private sector bids, its public sector wins are closer to 10 percent.

With an increased estimating load associated with public works bids, Terra Firma’s manual takeoff methods had to go. “On small jobs, we used a handheld counter, scaled rulers and a calculator,” Swikard admits, “and in some cases a primitive digitizer.” Not only was this time-consuming, but it required Terra Firma to print electronic blueprints. “We needed to speed things up and eliminate the cost of constantly printing plans, which could be 100 sheets per set.” The ProEst digital takeoff functionality, which allows estimators to perform digital takeoffs on-screen using electronic plans and a mouse, was the answer.

The most notable benefit from digital takeoffs is the ability to create estimates faster. “When doing a takeoff manually or using a digitizer, we were putting the data on paper or in a spreadsheet and re-entering the



information in ProEst. Eliminating that step by having takeoff data accumulate directly in ProEst is exponential in terms of hours saved,” Swikard states. “We easily see a 50 percent time savings on each estimate by performing digital takeoffs.” Eliminating paper plans when possible also saves Terra Firma money on printing costs and, as Swikard says, is the right thing to do environmentally.

### **The Bottom Line: Praise for ProEst**

While Swikard couldn't be happier with Terra Firma's ProEst Estimating and Takeoff software, his highest praise goes to the people behind the solution.

**“When it comes to customer service, and having people on staff that care about the product they produce, I've never seen a vendor as committed as ProEst.”**

Larry Swikard, President  
Terra Firma Landscape Co.

“When it comes to customer service, and having people on staff that care about the product they produce, I've never seen a vendor as committed as ProEst. Over the years, they've never left us stranded. When time is money, responsive service is of great value!”