

Phase I ESA Rate Guide 2026

Real pricing data — what Phase I Environmental Site Assessments cost, what drives the price, and how to avoid overpaying

- ✓ Typical Phase I ESA costs by site type and complexity
- ✓ What's included — and what costs extra (vapor, PFAS, historical research)
- ✓ Phase I vs. Transaction Screen vs. Desktop Review pricing comparison
- ✓ How to negotiate better rates without compromising quality

How Phase I ESA Billing Works

A Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) is a due diligence investigation performed before a commercial real estate transaction to identify Recognized Environmental Conditions (RECs) that may indicate contamination. The governing standard is ASTM E1527-21, which replaced the previous 2013 edition and introduced expanded requirements for vapor intrusion screening and updated environmental database review. Understanding the pricing structure helps you budget accurately and compare proposals from competing firms.

Billing Model Overview

Component	Description	Typical Range
Phase I ESA (standard, ASTM E1527-21)	Complete investigation: records review, site reconnaissance, interviews, historical research, report	\$2,500–\$6,000
Lender / bank-required additions	Additional requirements beyond ASTM standard (e.g., regulatory file review, wetlands screening, radon)	+\$200–\$1,000
Vapor intrusion screening	Assessment of potential vapor migration from subsurface contamination into buildings	+\$300–\$800 (when not included in base)
PFAS screening (non-scope consideration)	Optional review of potential PFAS sources near the property	+\$200–\$500
Rush / expedited delivery	Faster turnaround than standard 3–4 week timeline	+\$500–\$2,000
Transaction Screen (ASTM E1528)	Abbreviated assessment — does NOT satisfy All Appropriate Inquiries (AAI)	\$1,000–\$2,000
Desktop Review	Records-only review with no site visit — does NOT satisfy AAI	\$500–\$1,000

Quick Budget Reference

- Undeveloped land (vacant, no structures): \$2,000–\$3,500
- Standard commercial property (office, retail, warehouse): \$2,500–\$4,500
- Industrial / manufacturing site: \$3,500–\$6,000
- Gas station or dry cleaner (high-risk): \$4,000–\$6,500
- Multi-parcel or large acreage (50+ acres): \$5,000–\$10,000+

- Portfolio deal (multiple sites): \$1,800–\$3,500 per site (volume discount)

Phase I ESA Costs by Site Type

What Drives Phase I ESA Pricing

Site Type	Typical Cost	Complexity Driver	Timeline
Vacant / undeveloped land	\$2,000–\$3,500	Minimal structures, simpler history; cost depends on acreage	2–3 weeks
Office / retail building	\$2,500–\$4,000	Standard commercial; straightforward historical review	2–3 weeks
Warehouse / distribution center	\$2,500–\$4,500	Depends on prior use; industrial history increases scope	2–3 weeks
Multi-tenant commercial	\$3,000–\$5,000	More interviews, multiple tenant histories, complex operations	3–4 weeks
Light industrial / manufacturing	\$3,500–\$6,000	Chemical use history, waste disposal records, potential subsurface impacts	3–4 weeks
Gas station / automotive	\$4,000–\$6,500	Underground storage tanks (USTs), petroleum releases, regulatory file review	3–4 weeks
Dry cleaner (active or former)	\$4,000–\$6,500	Chlorinated solvent use, vapor intrusion potential, regulatory history	3–4 weeks
Agricultural land	\$2,500–\$5,000	Pesticide use, buried waste, irrigation well concerns	2–4 weeks
Multi-parcel / campus	\$5,000–\$10,000+	Multiple addresses, larger site reconnaissance, complex history	4–6 weeks
Portfolio (10+ sites)	\$1,800–\$3,500/site	Volume discount; standardized scope reduces per-site cost	4–8 weeks

The Single Biggest Price Variable

Historical use of the property. A vacant lot that has always been vacant costs less to assess than a lot that was formerly a gas station, dry cleaner, or manufacturing facility. Previous industrial use triggers deeper records research, regulatory file review, and potentially vapor intrusion screening — all of which increase cost.



What's Included in a Standard Phase I ESA

Anatomy of a Phase I ESA — ASTM E1527-21 Requirements

Four-Phase Process

Phase	Activities	Typical Hours	Why It Matters
1. Records Review	Environmental database search (EDR, GeoSearch), government agency records, historical records (Sanborn maps, aerial photos, city directories, topographic maps)	8–16 hours	Identifies past contamination, nearby sites, and historical uses
2. Site Reconnaissance	Physical inspection of the property and adjoining properties; look for staining, distressed vegetation, storage tanks, waste disposal evidence	2–8 hours (site visit + travel)	Ground-truthing what the records show; identifying visible conditions
3. Interviews	Property owner, occupants, local government officials, neighboring property owners	2–4 hours	First-hand knowledge of current and historical use; regulatory status
4. Report Preparation	Analysis of findings, identification of RECs/CRECs/HRECs, opinions, conclusions, and recommendations	8–16 hours	The deliverable — this is what you're paying for

What the Report Must Identify

Finding Type	Definition	Implication
REC (Recognized Environmental Condition)	The presence or likely presence of hazardous substances or petroleum products due to release or material threat of release	Further investigation recommended (Phase II ESA)
CREC (Controlled REC)	A REC that has been addressed with residual contamination remaining, managed under institutional or engineering controls	Ongoing obligations; buyer must maintain controls

HREC (Historical REC)

Finding Type	Definition	Implication
	A past release that has been addressed and meets unrestricted use criteria	Documented for record; no further action needed
De Minimis Condition	A condition that does not present a threat to human health or the environment	Noted but does not require further investigation
No RECs Identified	Clean report — no recognized environmental conditions found	Strongest protection under CERCLA innocent landowner defense

ASTM E1527-21 is the ONLY standard that satisfies EPA's All Appropriate Inquiries (AAI) rule.

A Phase I performed under the older 2013 standard, or a Transaction Screen under ASTM E1528, does NOT provide CERCLA liability protection. Always confirm your consultant is using the current E1527-21 standard.

Beyond the Standard Phase I: Add-On Services

Additional Services That May Increase Your Cost

Add-On Service	Typical Cost	When It's Needed	Required or Optional?
Environmental database report (EDR/ GeoSearch)	\$200–\$500	Every Phase I — the records backbone	Required (part of standard Phase I)
Historical aerial photographs	\$100–\$400	Standard for all Phase I ESAs	Required (part of standard Phase I)
Sanborn fire insurance maps	\$50–\$200	Sites in urban areas with pre-1970 history	Required where available
Regulatory file review (agency visit)	\$200–\$800	When nearby sites have known contamination or the site has regulatory history	Recommended; some lenders require it
Vapor intrusion / vapor encroachment screening	\$300–\$800	Properties near known contamination sources; ASTM E2600	Optional per E1527-21 but increasingly expected by lenders
PFAS screening (non-scope consideration)	\$200–\$500	Sites near airports, military bases, landfills, firefighting training areas	Optional — not yet required under CERCLA but becoming standard
Asbestos / lead-based paint survey	\$500–\$3,000	Buildings constructed before 1980 (asbestos) or 1978 (lead paint)	Separate from Phase I; often requested concurrently
Radon screening	\$150–\$400	Required by some lenders in high-radon zones	Lender-dependent
Wetlands determination	\$500–\$2,000	Properties with potential jurisdictional wetlands	Lender or regulatory requirement
Phase II ESA (if Phase I identifies RECs)	\$5,000–\$30,000+	Soil and groundwater sampling to confirm or deny contamination	Triggered by Phase I findings

Vapor Intrusion Screening

ASTM E1527-21 made vapor intrusion a more explicit consideration. While ASTM E2600 (Vapor Encroachment Screening) is technically optional, most lenders now expect it. Budget \$300-\$800 for this add-on if the property has any nearby contamination sources. Skipping it and getting caught on a lender review costs far more in delays.

Phase I vs. Transaction Screen vs. Desktop Review

Choosing the Right Level of Environmental Due Diligence

Factor	Phase I ESA (ASTM E1527-21)	Transaction Screen (ASTM E1528)	Desktop Review
Cost	\$2,500–\$6,000	\$1,000–\$2,000	\$500–\$1,000
Timeline	3–4 weeks	1–2 weeks	3–5 business days
Site visit	Yes — required	Limited or none	No
Interviews	Yes — required	Limited	No
Historical research	Comprehensive (Sanborn, aerials, directories)	Limited	Database only
Environmental database search	Yes	Yes	Yes
Satisfies AAI rule?	Yes	No	No
CERCLA innocent landowner defense?	Yes	No	No
Accepted by lenders?	Yes — universally	Rarely	No
Identifies RECs?	Yes — full investigation	May identify some concerns	May flag database hits only
Performed by Environmental Professional?	Yes — required	Not always required	Not required

A Transaction Screen is NOT a Phase I ESA and does NOT protect you.

The difference matters: a Transaction Screen saves \$1,500–\$4,000 upfront but provides ZERO CERCLA liability protection. If contamination is discovered after closing, you are fully liable as a responsible party. The Phase I ESA is the ONLY path to the innocent landowner defense.

When Each Level Is Appropriate

Scenario	Recommended Level	Why
Acquiring commercial property with a loan	Phase I ESA	Lender requires it; CERCLA protection essential
Cash purchase of commercial property	Phase I ESA	Still need CERCLA protection; cost is minimal vs. property value
Lease renewal / expansion (existing tenant)	Transaction Screen	Lower-risk; no property transfer
Undeveloped land with no industrial neighbors	Phase I ESA (may be lower cost)	Still required for CERCLA protection on any commercial transaction
Portfolio screening (50+ properties)	Transaction Screen → Phase I on flagged sites	Cost-effective triage approach

Rates by Region

Region	Typical Phase I Cost	Timeline	Key Notes
Northeast (NY, NJ, CT, MA, PA)	\$3,500–\$6,000	3–4 weeks	Dense industrial history; higher database hit rates; more complex research
Southeast (FL, GA, NC, SC, VA)	\$2,500–\$4,500	2–3 weeks	Growing market; moderate complexity
Midwest (OH, MI, IL, IN, WI)	\$2,500–\$4,500	2–3 weeks	Manufacturing history; brownfield redevelopment common
Texas	\$2,500–\$5,000	2–3 weeks	Oil & gas history; UST prevalence
California	\$3,500–\$6,500	3–5 weeks	Strictest state regulations; longer agency response times; higher labor costs
Pacific Northwest (WA, OR)	\$3,000–\$5,000	3–4 weeks	Environmental awareness; moderate complexity
Mountain West (CO, AZ, NV, UT)	\$2,500–\$4,500	2–3 weeks	Mining history in some areas; generally less complex
Rural / agricultural	\$2,000–\$3,500	2–3 weeks	Simpler history; fewer database hits; lower cost of living

Northeast Premium Explained

Phase I ESAs in the NYC/NJ/CT corridor cost 20–40% more than national averages due to dense industrial history (more Sanborn maps to review, more regulatory files to pull), higher consultant labor rates, and longer agency response times. Budget accordingly for Northeastern transactions.

How to Control Phase I ESA Costs

Numbered list

- 1 Start early — avoid rush fees.** A standard Phase I takes 3–4 weeks. Starting the process at LOI (letter of intent) stage gives you time for standard delivery. Waiting until 2 weeks before closing triggers rush surcharges of \$500–\$2,000.
- 2 Provide property information upfront.** Giving the consultant tax records, surveys, previous environmental reports, lease agreements, and property history saves them research time and reduces cost.
- 3 Negotiate portfolio pricing.** Multi-site transactions should be priced per-site at volume rates. A 10-site portfolio should cost \$1,800–\$3,500/site, not \$4,000+ each. Firms compete aggressively for portfolio work.
- 4 Choose the right level of assessment.** Not every property needs every add-on. A new-construction office building on previously undeveloped land may not need vapor intrusion screening. Let the consultant recommend scope based on site conditions — don't over-scope.
- 5 Maintain consultant relationships.** Firms that handle your repeat business will prioritize your timeline and often offer preferred pricing. Building a relationship with 2–3 qualified firms gives you leverage and reliability.
- 6 Bundle Phase I with related services.** If you also need asbestos surveys, lead paint inspections, or radon testing, bundling with the Phase I firm often saves 10–20% vs. separate vendors.
- 7 Get three quotes with identical scopes.** Pricing variation within a market can be 30–50%. Specify ASTM E1527-21, your expected add-ons, and deliverable timeline so quotes are comparable.
- 8 Don't pay twice — update instead of redo.** If a previous Phase I was completed within the last 180 days, you may be able to update it (per ASTM E1527-21 Section 4.6) rather than commissioning a new one. An update costs \$500–\$1,500 vs. \$2,500–\$6,000 for a new assessment.

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Understand the 180-day shelf life. Phase I ESAs are valid for 180 days from the date of the report. Government database searches must be updated within 180 days of the transaction. Plan your assessment timeline so the report doesn't expire before closing.

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Beware bargain-basement pricing. A Phase I under \$2,000 for a standard commercial property should raise questions. Consultants cutting price are likely cutting scope — shorter site visits, fewer interviews, less historical research, and less thorough analysis. A cheap Phase I that misses a REC can cost you millions.

Budget Planning Worksheet

Use this worksheet to estimate total environmental due diligence costs. Print and fill in for each transaction.

Line Item	Estimated Cost	Actual Cost
Phase I ESA (base, ASTM E1527-21)	\$ _____	\$ _____
Environmental database report (EDR/GeoSearch)	Included / \$ _____	\$ _____
Historical aerial photographs	Included / \$ _____	\$ _____
Regulatory file review (if separate)	\$ _____	\$ _____
Vapor intrusion screening (E2600)	\$ _____	\$ _____
PFAS screening (non-scope)	\$ _____	\$ _____
Asbestos survey (if pre-1980 building)	\$ _____	\$ _____
Lead paint inspection (if pre-1978 building)	\$ _____	\$ _____
Radon screening (if required by lender)	\$ _____	\$ _____
Rush / expedited delivery surcharge	\$ _____	\$ _____
Phase II ESA (if RECs identified)	\$ _____	\$ _____
15% contingency buffer	\$ _____	\$ _____
TOTAL ESTIMATED	\$ _____	\$ _____

Complete this worksheet at the LOI stage. Include it in your due diligence budget alongside title, survey, and legal costs. Environmental due diligence typically represents 1-3% of total transaction costs — a small price for CERCLA liability protection.

CTA box

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