

FHWA Tips on Evaluating a Commercially Useful Function

Of all the many elements in the DBE program there is one that can have the most detrimental impact on the ability of the prime contractor to meet its contract goal as well as the ability of a recipient to meet its overall goal. This element is commonly referred to as commercially useful function or “CUF”. How can just one element of the program have such an impact achieving the results Congress intended when it established the DBE program?

Both the prime contractor and the State Transportation Agency (STA) receive credit toward the DBE goal (contract and overall) only when a DBE working on a contract performs a CUF. DBEs generally perform work on a contract either as a contractor, a trucker, a regular dealer, or a manufacturer. While each of these categories is evaluated differently when determining whether the DBE has performed a CUF, there is one guiding principle that must be followed. Under the terms established in 49 CFR §26.55, a DBE firm performs a CUF when it is:

"Responsible for execution of the work of the contract or a distinct element of the work . . . by actually performing, managing, and supervising the work involved."

The question contract administrators often face is, “What are the management, supervision, and performance actions of a DBE firm that satisfactorily meet this requirement?” Evaluating these areas will form the basis to render a determination that a DBE has in fact performed a CUF. The contract is the one key reference point for any contract administrator and it is essential for this evaluation process. The contract has an effective description of the work to be performed by a DBE and is a legally recognized document.

The USDOT DBE regulations identify the following key factors that should be analyzed when determining whether a CUF is being performed:

- ❑ Evaluation of the amount of work subcontracted, whether it is consistent with normal industry practices;
- ❑ Whether the amount the firm is paid under the contract is commensurate with the work that is actually being performed to be credited towards the goal;
- ❑ When the DBE furnishes materials, the DBE must be responsible for negotiating the price, for determining the quality and quantity of the material, ordering the material, and paying for it. As a contractor, a DBE firm would typically be hired to both furnish the material and install it with its own labor force;
- ❑ Whether the DBE’s role is limited to that of an extra participant in a transaction, contract, or project through which funds are passed in order to obtain the appearance of DBE participation. In essence, was the role merely a contrived arrangement for the purpose of meeting the DBE contract goal?

In determining whether a DBE is such an extra participant, you must examine similar transactions, particularly those performed by non-DBEs. A DBE must have a necessary and useful role in the transaction, of a kind for which there is a market outside the context of the program. The firm’s role must not be a superfluous step added in an attempt to obtain credit towards the goal.

Normal Industry Practice

One of the most important elements to consider in any analysis of whether the DBE is performing a CUF is determining whether its role on the project is consistent with “normal industry practice.” This means, one must determine if the DBE is performing the work or services in the manner normally performed by all contractors—DBEs and non-DBEs. However, even if a DBE is performing pursuant to normal industry practices if those practices, in fact, erode the ability of the DBE to control its work and remain independent, the practice may affect how much can be credited toward the DBE goal and may raise questions about the DBE eligibility.

One general rule of thumb that can be considered is whether a DBE would be performing in the same manner if there was no DBE program. As further evidence of meeting normal industry practice, one must consider if the DBE performs this work on non-federally assisted contracts.

Monitoring

In keeping with normal contract requirements, it is the primary responsibility of the prime contractor to ensure that the DBE is performing a CUF. The STA, as the contracting agency, has oversight responsibility to ensure that the prime contractor has effectively met this responsibility under its contract with the STA.

The STA needs to have sufficient field personnel and general headquarters staff to monitor the performance of work performed by DBEs on all federal aid projects, including those of sub-recipients. Contractors, DBEs, local public agencies, and all employees are required to cooperate in carrying out this responsibility. The STA should establish and enforce monitoring procedures that include the following:

- ❑ Clearly written directives defining the role and interrelationship of the STA’s various departmental staff responsible to monitor and evaluate the contractor’s compliance with the DBE contract provisions;
- ❑ Procedures that spell out specific monitoring activities and responsibilities of a project level monitoring program;
- ❑ Exchange of information between departmental, central and field offices in reporting accomplishments, violations and enforcement; and
- ❑ Procedures for the application of appropriate sanctions once a determination of failure to meet the DBE contract requirements is made.

DBE Performance - CUF

Highway firms certified in the DBE program typically perform in four (4) categories: prime or subcontractor, trucker, regular dealer, and manufacturer. The following is an overview of each category, typical CUF questions, and a list of documents to review.

While DBEs are occasionally awarded prime contracts, DBEs primarily work as subcontractors for the prime. Subcontractors typically perform specific contract items and provide their own labor and materials. To determine whether a DBE subcontractor is performing a CUF, five (5) distinct operations must be considered: management, workforce, equipment, materials, and performance.

These areas must be evaluated to make a CUF determination, and situations need to be reviewed on a case by case basis. Some of the CUF questions cited below may also be quite adaptable to the other three types of work categories.

MANAGEMENT

The DBE must manage the work that has been contracted to its firm. Management includes, but is not limited to:

- ❑ Scheduling work operations;
- ❑ Ordering equipment and materials;
- ❑ Preparing and submitting certified payrolls;
- ❑ Hiring and firing employees.

The DBE owner must supervise daily operations, either personally, or with a full time, skilled and knowledgeable superintendent employed by and paid wages by the DBE. The superintendent must be present on the job site and under the DBE owner's direct supervision. The DBE owner must make all operational and managerial decisions for the firm. Mere performance of administrative duties is not considered supervision of daily operations.

❑ Red Flags

Red flags are questionable practices which may warrant further review. The red flags for management operations may include, but are not limited to:

- ❑ The DBE owner or superintendent provides little or no supervision of the work;
- ❑ The DBE's superintendent is not a regular employee of the firm or supervision is performed by personnel associated with the prime contractor, or another business;
- ❑ Key staff and personnel are not under the control of the DBE;
- ❑ The DBE's owner is not aware of the status of the work or the performance of the business;
- ❑ Inquiries by department or FHWA representatives are answered by the prime contractor.

Typical CUF questions could include:

- ❑ Is there a written legal document executed by the DBE to perform a distinct element of work?
- ❑ Who does the on-site DBE representative report to?
- ❑ Has this individual ever shown up on any other contractor's payroll?
- ❑ Has the DBE owner been present on the jobsite?

Typical documentation to evaluate:

- ❑ Written contract
- ❑ Daily inspection reports and project diaries
- ❑ Payrolls

WORKFORCE

In order to be considered an independent business, a DBE must keep a regular workforce. DBEs cannot "share" employees with non-DBE contractors, particularly the prime contractor. The DBE shall perform its work with employees normally employed by and under the DBE's control. All work must be performed with a workforce the DBE controls, with a minimum of **30%** of the work to be performed by the DBE's regular employees, or those hired by the DBE for the project from a source, such as a labor union. The DBE, in all instances, must have direct supervision over all of its employees.

The DBE must be responsible for payroll and labor compliance requirements for all employees performing on the contract and is expected to prepare and finance the payrolls. Direct or indirect payments by any other contractor are not allowed.

The DBE must perform at least 30% of the total cost of its contract with its own workforce. The DBE must not subcontract a greater portion of the work than would be expected on the basis of normal industry practice for the type of work involved.

☐ Red Flags

Some questionable workforce practices which may warrant further review include, but are not limited to:

- ☐ Supervision of DBE employees by another contractor;
- ☐ Actual work is performed by personnel normally employed by the prime contractor or another business;
- ☐ Employees are paid by the DBE and the prime contractor.

Typical CUF questions could include:

- ☐ Who prepares the DBE's certified payroll?
- ☐ Have any of the DBE's employees ever shown up on any other contractor's payroll?
- ☐ Who does the DBE on-site representative contact for hiring, firing or to modify the contract due to site condition changes or change orders?
- ☐ Asking DBE employees on the jobsite who they report to and who signs their checks.

Typical Documents to evaluate:

- ☐ Written contract
- ☐ Daily inspection reports and project diaries
- ☐ Certified payrolls
- ☐ Copies of cancelled checks, if necessary

EQUIPMENT

A DBE may lease specialized equipment from a contractor, excluding the prime, if it is consistent with normal industry practices and at rates competitive for the area. The lease must specify the terms of the agreement. The lease must be for a short period of time and involve a specialized piece of equipment to be used at the job site. The lease may include an operator for the equipment who remains on the lessor's payroll if this is a generally acceptable practice within the industry. The operation of the equipment must be subject to the full control of the DBE.

The DBE is expected to provide the operator for non-specialized equipment and is responsible for all payroll and labor compliance requirements. A separate lease agreement is required. All lease agreements should be approved by the STA prior to the DBE starting the work.

On a case by case basis, the STA may approve the DBE to lease a specialized piece of equipment from the prime. However, the STA must ensure that the lease amount is not counted toward the contract goal. Equipment leased and used by the DBE with payment deducted from the prime contractor's payment (s) to the DBE is not allowed.

□ Red Flags

Some questionable equipment practices which may warrant further review include, but are not limited to:

- Equipment used by the DBE belongs to the prime contractor or another contractor with no formal lease agreement;
- The equipment signs and markings cover another owner's identity, usually through the use of magnetic signs;
- A DBE trucking business uses trucks owned by the prime contractor.

Typical CUF questions could include:

- List the major self-propelled (engine) equipment used by the DBE. Determine if the equipment belongs to the DBE. Is it owned or leased?
- If leased, is there an agreement identifying the terms and parties? Is it signed by the DBE owner?
- Does the equipment have the DBE's markings or emblems?
- Is the equipment under the direct supervision of the DBE?
- Is the operator of the leased equipment the DBE's employee?
- If the equipment is leased, is the payment for the equipment deducted from the work performed?

Typical Documents to evaluate:

- Written contract
- Daily inspection reports and project diaries
- Leases

MATERIALS

For a DBE contractor (furnish and install) to receive credit for supplying materials, the DBE must perform the following four functions: (1) negotiate price; (2) determine quality and quantity; (3) order the materials; and (4) pay for the material itself. If the DBE does not perform all of these functions, it has not performed a CUF with respect to obtaining the materials, and the cost of the materials may not be counted toward the DBE goal. Invoices for the material should show the payor as the DBE.

While the regulations tell recipients to consider normal industry practices, this does not overrule the requirement that the DBE must perform the four functions enumerated above. For example, even if standard industry practices in certain areas of the country allow no subcontractor to perform all four functions enumerated above (e.g. manufacturers will only negotiate with a prime, thereby eliminating the DBE's ability to negotiate the price), the "furnish" portion of the transaction does not lend itself to the performance of a CUF by the DBE, and credit cannot be given for the acquisition or cost of the materials.

□ Red Flags

Some questionable material supply practices which may warrant further review include, but are not limited to:

- Materials for the DBE are ordered, or paid for, by the prime contractor;
- Two party checks or joint checks are sent by the prime to the supplier or manufacturer, instead of sent by the DBE;
- Materials or supplies necessary for the DBE's performance are delivered to, billed to, or paid by another business;
- Materials are delivered to the jobsite by a party separate from the DBE;
- Payment for materials is deducted by the prime contractor from payments to the DBE for work performed;
- A DBE prime contractor only purchases materials while performing little or no work.

Typical CUF questions could include:

- Is there a written contract executed by the DBE to perform a distinct element of work? Is the work to be performed by a DBE a "furnish and install" item of work?
- Who makes arrangements for delivery of materials?
- Who are the material invoices made out to?
- Who scheduled delivery of materials?
- In whose name are materials shipped?
- Who actually delivered the materials?
- If two party checks are used, who are the parties identified as payable to?

Typical Documentation to evaluate:

- Written contract
- Delivery tickets
- Invoices
- Daily inspection reports and project diaries

PERFORMANCE

The DBE must be responsible for the performance, management and supervision of a distinct element of the work, in accordance with normal industry practice (except where such practices are inconsistent with the DBE regulations).

□ Red Flags

Some questionable performance practices which may warrant further review include, but are not limited to:

- Work is being done jointly by the DBE and another contractor;
- The work to be performed by the DBE is outside of the DBE's known experience or capability;
- Any portion of the work designated to be performed by a DBE subcontractor is performed by the prime contractor or any other firm;
- The DBE is working without a subcontract approved by the department, except in the case of trucking;
- A DBE prime contractor subcontracts more than 50% of the contract value;
- The agreement between the prime contractor and DBE artificially inflates the DBE participation;
- An agreement that erodes the ownership, control or independence of the DBE subcontractor;
- A DBE works for only one prime contractor, or a large portion of the firm's contracts are with one contractor;
- The volume of work is beyond the capacity of the DBE.

Typical CUF questions could include:

- Does the DBE on-site representative effectively manage the job site without any interference from the prime contractor?
- Does the DBE appear to have control over methods of work on its contract items?
- Is the DBE actually scheduling work activities, material deliveries and other related actions required for execution of the work?
- Has any other contractor performed any amount of work specified in the DBE's contract?

Typical Documents to evaluate:

- Written contract
- Daily inspection reports or project diaries

DBE TRUCKING FIRMS

To be certified in the DBE program as a trucking firm, the DBE is required to own and operate at least one fully licensed, insured, and operational truck used on the contract. To perform a CUF, a DBE must also be responsible for the management and supervision of the entire trucking operation or a specified portion of the trucking operation to which it has been committed. There cannot be a contrived arrangement for the purpose of meeting a DBE goal.

A DBE can supplement its fleet by leasing a truck(s) from an established equipment leasing business open to the general public. The lease must indicate that the DBE has exclusive use of and control over the truck. This requirement does not preclude the leased truck from working for others during the term of the lease with the consent of the DBE, so long as the lease gives the DBE absolute priority for use of the leased truck. Otherwise, the DBE does not receive full credit for DBE participation.

Leased trucks must display the name and identification number of the DBE. The DBE trucker must also hold the necessary, where appropriate, license, hauling permit, etc., as required by the State to transport material on public highways.

To count the value of DBE trucking services toward a contract goal, the following can occur:

- ❑ The DBE may lease trucks from another DBE, including an owner-operator that is certified as a DBE. The DBE can count the entire value of services performed by these DBE trucks.
- ❑ The DBE may also lease trucks from non-DBEs and owner--operators. The DBE can count the value of these trucking services up to the value of services performed by the DBE trucks used on the contract.
- ❑ DBE participation can be counted for the value of services of non-DBE trucks that exceed the value of the services performed by DBE trucks only in the amount of the fee or commission a DBE receives as a result of the lease arrangement.

In order for the STA or subrecipient to monitor the performance of a DBE trucking firm, the work to be performed must be covered by a subcontract approved by the STA prior to performing the work. Additional documentation required when the DBE leases equipment is a valid lease to be provided to the STA for appropriate action. To be considered valid, the lease must include such items as the lessor's name, list of trucks to be leased by vehicle identification number (VIN), and the agreed upon amount of the cost and method of payment. It should be the responsibility of the DBE to provide the operator's fuel, maintenance and insurance for all leased trucks.

Typical CUF questions could include:

- ❑ Do the trucks used on the project belong to the DBE?
- ❑ If leased, is there a formal lease identifying the terms and parties?
- ❑ Are the rates appropriate?
- ❑ Is there an approved subcontract?
- ❑ If so, who are the parties?
- ❑ Are the DBE's employees shown on the certified payrolls?

Typical Documentation to evaluate:

- ❑ Subcontracts
- ❑ Leases
- ❑ Payroll records
- ❑ Daily inspection reports and project diaries

DBE REGULAR DEALERS

In order for a firm to operate as a regular dealer, it must perform CUF, and must also comply with other requirements applicable to regular dealers. It must be an established, regular business that engages, as its principal business and under its own name, in the purchase and sale or lease of the products in question. In addition, a regular dealer is a firm that owns, operates, or maintains a store, warehouse, or other establishment in which the materials, supplies, articles or equipment of the general character described by the specifications and required under the contract are bought, kept in stock, and regularly sold or leased to the public in the usual course of business, except as noted below.

It is important to make a distinction between a regular dealer and a firm that supplies a product on an *ad hoc* basis in relation to a particular contract or contractor. A regular dealer has a regular trade with a variety of customers. One of the key considerations of being a regular, established dealer is the presence of an inventory of materials and/or supplies. A regular dealer assumes the actual and contractual responsibility for the provision of the material and/or supplies.

A firm may be a regular dealer in bulk items such as petroleum products, steel, cement, gravel, stone, or asphalt without owning, operating, or maintaining a place of business if the firm both owns and operates distribution equipment for the products. Any supplementing of regular dealers' own distribution equipment shall be by a long-term lease agreement and not on an *ad hoc* or contract-by-contract basis.

If a DBE meets the requirements of a regular dealer, it may count 60% of the cost of the materials, if reasonable, toward the contract goal. Packagers, brokers, manufacturers' representatives, or other persons who arrange or expedite transactions are not regular dealers.

Typical CUF questions could include:

- ❑ Does the regular dealer have an established storage facility and inventory?
- ❑ Does the dealer have a business that sells to the public on a routine basis in the product being supplied?
- ❑ Does the business stock the product for use on the project as a normal stock item?
- ❑ Who is delivering and unloading the material?
- ❑ Is distribution equipment owned or leased, long term by the DBE, used in delivering the product?
- ❑ For bulk items, where does the material come from? Does the DBE have a distribution agreement?

Typical Documentation to evaluate:

- ❑ Purchase Orders
- ❑ Invoices
- ❑ Delivery Tickets

DBE MANUFACTURERS

As described in 26.55(e)(1)(ii)), a manufacturer is a firm that operates or maintains a factory or establishment that produces, on the premises, the materials, supplies, articles, or equipment required under the contract and of the general character described by the specifications. Examples of such items could be a concrete ready mix plant, a crushing operation, or a steel or concrete fabricating plant.

Typical CUF questions could include:

- ❑ Is the business's primary function to manufacture construction products?
- ❑ Does the business stock the product altered for this project as a normal stock item?
- ❑ Is the quality of the materials controlled by the DBE?
- ❑ Does the DBE purchase the raw material used in its plant?

Typical Documents to evaluate:

- ❑ Purchase orders
- ❑ Bill of lading
- ❑ Shipping tickets

Sanctions for Compliance and Enforcement

The prime contractor is ultimately responsible for ensuring that a DBE performs a CUF. Failure of a DBE to perform a commercially useful function should result in the STA taking specific definitive actions to enforce the CUF requirement of the contract. Some of the actions an STA could take include, but are not limited to, the following:

- ❑ Deny or limit credit towards the contract goal;
- ❑ Require the prime to make GFE to replace the DBE to meet the goal on remaining work;
- ❑ Withhold progress payments;
- ❑ Terminate the contract;
- ❑ Reduce the contractor's prequalification limit.

Some questions that could be part of an evaluation procedure:

- ❑ If a CUF was not performed by the DBE, what action was taken to correct the deficiency?
- ❑ Did the action taken correct the deficiency?

List of Typical Documentation to Collect:

- ❑ Executed contracts

- ❑ Material/ supply agreements
- ❑ Invoices of materials/supplies
- ❑ Equipment titles of ownership
- ❑ Equipment lease/rental agreements
- ❑ Hauling tickets
- ❑ Delivery tickets
- ❑ Canceled checks
- ❑ Project inspection/diaries
- ❑ Payroll records

When a DBE is presumed not to be performing a CUF, the DBE may present evidence to rebut this presumption. Decisions regarding CUF determinations are subject to review by concerned operating administrations, such as the FHWA. However, CUF decisions are not appealable to USDOT, they are contract administration issues.

CUF & Certification

Certification and commercially useful function are separate and distinct issues. Certification decisions address the nature of a firm's ownership and structure while CUF primarily concerns the role a firm has played in a particular transaction. Even if the certification process has identified the DBE's ability to perform as a contractor, regular dealer, or manufacturer, it is important to review and determine what and how a DBE actually performs during the performance of the contract.

A DBE's repeated failure to perform a CUF may raise questions regarding the firm's control, as it relates to independence, and perhaps ownership. If there is evidence of a pattern of failing to perform a CUF that raises serious issues with the firm's ability to control the work and its independence from the non-DBE firm, the STA should address this matter. An STA may commence a proceeding under 26.87 to determine the continued eligibility of the DBE firm.

In cases of deliberate attempts to circumvent the intent of the DBE program, or fraud, these actions may lead to criminal prosecution of both the prime contractor and the DBE. If fraud is suspected the STA should contact the DOT Office of Inspector General.

- j. Is the DBE maintaining its own payroll?
 Yes No
- k. Who prepares the DBEs certified payroll? _____
- l. Is the DBE actually scheduling work activities, material deliveries and other related actions required for prosecution of the work?
 Yes No
- m. Did the DBE subcontract any items or portions of the work to any other firm?
 Yes No
 If yes, what % was subcontracted? _____%
 Name of the firm _____

2. Equipment

- a. List the major self-propelled (engine) equipment used by the DBE: _____
- b. Does the equipment have the DBE's markings or emblems?
 Yes No
 If another firm's markings are discernible, note the name: _____
- c. Is the DBE's equipment?
 Owned Leased from _____
- d. If leased, is there a formal agreement identifying the terms and parties?
 Yes No
- e. Is the equipment under the direct supervision of the DBE?
 Yes No
- f. Is the operator of the leased equipment the DBE's employee?
 Yes No
 If not the DBE's, whose employee is he/she? _____
- g. If the equipment is leased, is the payment for the equipment deducted from the work performed?
 Yes No

3. Workforce:

- a. List the name of DBE's crew as observed during the operation described above:

- b. Has any of this crew ever shown up on any other contractors' payroll?
 Yes No
- c. Does the DBE's workforce know who they work for?
 Yes No

4. Materials:

- a. Is the DBE contracted to furnish and install a contract item?
 Yes No
- b. Is the quality and quantity of the materials controlled by the DBE?
 Yes No
- c. If two party checks used, who are the parties identified as payable to:

- d. Who makes arrangements for delivery of materials? _____
- e. Material Invoices made out to: _____
- f. Who scheduled delivery of materials? _____
- g. In whose name area materials shipped? _____
- h. Does the prime contractor direct whom the DBE is to obtain the material from and at what price?
 Yes No

5. Performance:

- a. Does the DBE appear to have control over methods of work on its contract items?
 Yes No
- b. Has any other contractor performed any amount of work specified in the DBE contract?
 Yes No

6. Other Work categories:

Truckers:

- a. Are DBE trucks present on the job site? Yes No
 Are they Owned Leased from _____
- If leased, is there a formal agreement identifying the terms and parties?
 Yes No
- b. Are the rates appropriate?
 Yes No
- c. Is there an approved subcontract or written agreement?
 Yes No
 Who are the parties? _____

- d. Are DBE employees shown on the certified payroll?
 Yes No

Regular Dealers:

- a. Does the regular dealer have an established storage facility and inventory?
 Yes No
- b. Does the dealer have a business that sells the product being supplied to the public on a routine basis?
 Yes No
- c. Does the business stock the product being supplied as a normal stock item?
 Yes No
- d. Is the quantity and quality of the materials controlled by the DBE?
 Yes No
- e. In whose name are the materials shipped? _____
- f. Who is delivering and unloading the material? _____
- g. Is the distribution equipment used in delivering the product the DBE's?
 Yes No
 If so, is it: Owned Leased
- h. If leased, is it a long term lease and not a lease developed specifically for the project?
 Yes No

7. Manufacturer

- a. Is the business's primary function to manufacturer construction products?
 Yes No
- b. Does the business stock the product manufactured or altered for this project as a normal stock item?
 Yes No
- c. Is the quality of the materials controlled by the DBE?
 Yes No

General Notes: