2026 EDITION · A REPORT BY ATLAS

The State of AI in Environmental Consulting

How environmental consulting firms are putting AI to work, and what separates the leaders from everyone else.

A field-wide benchmark: real adoption numbers, the workflows being rewritten, the liability stalling firms, and the maturity model that puts every firm on the curve.

WITH-ATLAS.AI/STATE-OF-AI

01 · THE LANDSCAPE

AI has arrived in environmental consulting. Most firms just haven't organized around it yet.

Adoption is real and the returns are documented, but it's uneven, ungoverned, and concentrated in a handful of firms. The biggest are already building AI in-house. For everyone else, the edge is a partner they can trust. Start with four numbers.

90% less

time to draft a proposal at firms running their own AI tools, down to a tenth of what it used to take.

GLOBAL CONSULTANCY BENCHMARKS, 2026

$8,500

of a typical $10,000 Phase I ESA is labor. That is the cost AI is now pushing toward roughly $1,000 a site.

INDUSTRY EXPERT INTERVIEWS, 2026

$1M

recovered when AI read 300 old site reports and flagged a contamination release everyone had missed.

ATLAS FIELD RESEARCH, 2026

< 5%

of firms qualify as "skilled practitioners," with AI built into the daily work. Adoption is wide but shallow.

AEC INDUSTRY SURVEYS, 2026

02 · THE WORK

Where AI lands first

This is already happening. These are the environmental workflows AI is rewriting now, where the time savings are documented and the EP still controls the final product.

Phase I ESA & impact-assessment drafting

AI works through the site data (flora, fauna, wind velocity) and drafts the report. The Environmental Professional reviews and signs.

30-40 hrs → ~$1,000

Records review & database search

AI reads tens of thousands of pages of data-room documents into validated assumption sheets and red-flag lists.

65% faster

Proposal generation & SOWs

Firms running dozens of in-house AI tools have cut proposal time to a fraction of what it took.

90% reduction

Data analysis & scientific claims

It works through tens of millions of data points at once, for faster, more defensible regulated reporting.

120 → 78 days

Historical document review

Pull site history, ownership, and prior uses out of decades of scanned records, maps, and reports.

Days → hours

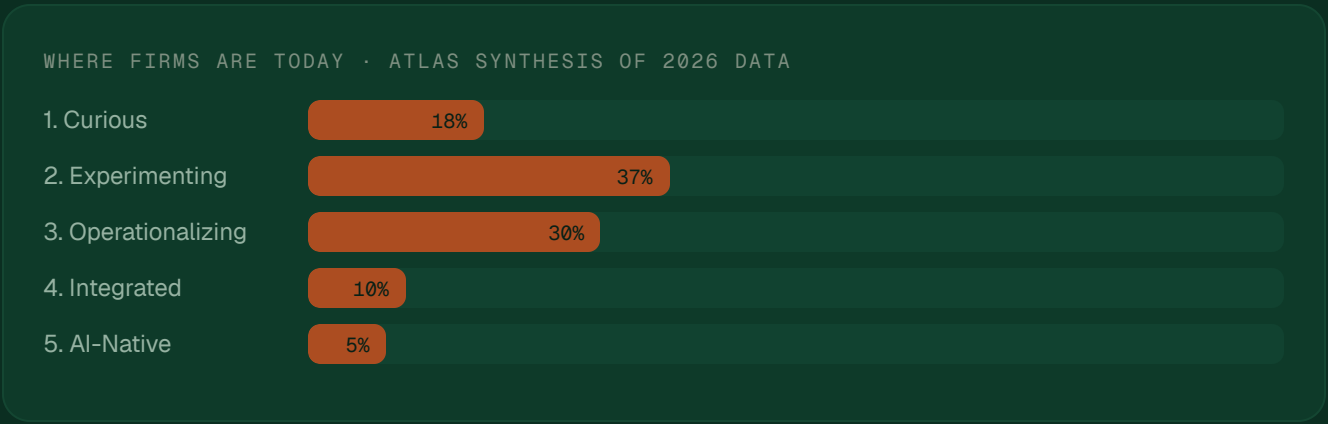
Field notes & meeting capture

Capture site-walk and kickoff notes, then turn them into agendas, summaries, and action items.

03 · THE FRAMEWORK

The AI-Native Maturity Model

Every firm sits somewhere on the curve from AI-curious to AI-Native, measured across five dimensions.



STAGE 1 **Curious** Quiet experiments. Nothing about the work has changed.

STAGE 2 **Experimenting** A champion or two piloting tools, informally and unmeasured.

STAGE 3 **Operationalizing** AI in real workflows, with the first guardrails in place.

STAGE 4 **Integrated** AI across core work, governed, trained, and measured.

STAGE 5 **AI-Native** AI-first by default. New services, new pricing, a real lead on the field.

SCORED ACROSS FIVE DIMENSIONS

Workflow Integration. Where AI actually touches the work: report writing, records review, data analysis, field data.

Tooling & Infrastructure. From consumer chatbots to purpose-built, integrated, governed systems.

Governance, QA & Liability. The one that matters most in a regulated, EP-signed, legally defensible field.

Talent & Culture. Whether AI skill is a fluke of a few enthusiasts or built into the firm.

Client & Commercial Model. Whether efficiency leaks out as lower bills or gets captured as margin and new work.

04 · THE GAP

Two forces keep good firms stuck.

The technology works. What stalls adoption is the economics and the liability, and both are specific to this field in ways most AI commentary misses.

STRUCTURAL BARRIER

Professional liability & defensibility

Deliverables are EP-signed and tied to ASTM E1527-21. AI can't carry that liability, and malpractice claims involving AI just hit a five-year high.

STRUCTURAL BARRIER

The billable-hour disincentive

Bill faster and you bill less. Leaders are moving to fixed-fee and value-based pricing, one global firm is taking fixed-price work from 50% to 60% of its mix, so efficiency turns into margin instead of lost revenue.

Accuracy, hallucination & "AI washing"

A wrong REC or a single unit slip carries real legal weight. Recent filings show automated errors off by 1,000× (a mercury threshold) and 1,000,000× (a carbon figure).

The data-quality problem

About 75% of firms still keep core data in spreadsheets, and AI can't work on what it can't read. The ones getting results cleaned up their data first.

Vague insurance & client acceptance

Most liability policies say nothing about AI, and the norms for what clients will accept are still being written.

Skills, time & buy-in

No one owns it, no one is trained, and leadership hasn't committed.

05 · THE FRONTIER

What AI-Native firms do differently

The firms in front aren't using better chatbots. They've changed how the work, the pricing, and the team are organized.

01 **They redesign the work instead of bolting AI on**

They rebuild the workflow around AI from the ground up. People move up to judgment, QA, and the client relationship.

02 **They make governance a product**

Traceability, audit trails, and defensibility become something clients pay for, not a compliance afterthought.

03 **They break the billable-hour trap**

Pricing moves to fixed-fee, value, and subscription, so efficiency becomes margin instead of lost revenue.

04 **They turn their archive into an edge**

Years of reports and site data become an advantage no competitor or off-the-shelf tool can copy.

05 **They make AI fluency the baseline**

Role-based training and AI-literate hiring make the skill part of the firm, not a few enthusiasts.

06 · THE FIELD

What the field’s leaders are saying

Anonymized statements from executives at leading North American environmental, engineering, and infrastructure firms, plus practitioners we spoke with about how AI is moving through the field.

“AI and the software enablement that we have seen is allowing us to do more, not less, with more people as well, with the use of AI.”

Chief Executive Officer
Global engineering & environmental firm

“I’d characterize it as our clients trying to seek out ways that they can employ us to deploy something that is more valuable.”

Chairman & CEO
Top North American infrastructure consultancy

“Technology isn’t the risk, what we ask it to do is the risk.”

Field-services lead
Regional environmental firm

“AI can make garbage data look compelling, beautiful visualizations and seemingly logical outputs over bad data.”

Technical panel
National environmental conference, 2026

· METHODOLOGY & SOURCES

How this report was built

Credibility is the point. This edition pulls together published research, public earnings calls, company filings, broker research, and industry surveys from 2024 to 2026 (aggregated through AlphaSense), plus our own interviews across the field, set against Atlas's framework for AI maturity in environmental consulting. Figures are labeled by type: cited, adjacent-sector proxy, or Atlas estimate. Estimates are never presented as survey results.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Deltek / Unanet / Nemetschek, 2026 AEC industry adoption studies

M-Files / Forrester TEI, governed document & workflow platforms (301% ROI)

EPIC Insurance Brokers, first rise in legal malpractice claims in five years

U.S. EPA, FY 2027 Budget Overview (AI in environmental reviews)

LightBox, City Directories & 2026 AI Benchmark (Phase I ESA)

Stanford Digital Economy Lab, "Canaries in the Coal Mine"

IBISWorld, Environmental Consulting in the US ($27.4B market)

Atlas field research, June 2026 (anonymized practitioner interviews + national conference)

Find out where your firm stands.

Take the 2-minute assessment for your firm's stage, where you stand against the field, and the three moves to the next level. Atlas builds the governed AI agents, from Phase I ESAs to records review and reporting, that get you there.

with-atlas.ai/state-of-ai/diagnostic