



AAACE International Recommended Practice No. 18R-97

**COST ESTIMATE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM –
AS APPLIED IN ENGINEERING, PROCUREMENT, AND CONSTRUCTION
FOR THE PROCESS INDUSTRIES**
TCM Framework: 7.3 – Cost Estimating and Budgeting

Rev. November 29, 2011

Note: As AAACE International Recommended Practices evolve over time, please refer to www.aacei.org for the latest revisions.

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PURPOSE

As a recommended practice of AACE International, the *Cost Estimate Classification System* provides guidelines for applying the general principles of estimate classification to project cost estimates (i.e., cost estimates that are used to evaluate, approve, and/or fund projects). The *Cost Estimate Classification System* maps the phases and stages of project cost estimating together with a generic project scope definition maturity and quality matrix, which can be applied across a wide variety of process industries.

This addendum to the generic recommended practice (17R-97) provides guidelines for applying the principles of estimate classification specifically to project estimates for engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) work for the process industries. This addendum supplements the generic recommended practice by providing:

- a section that further defines classification concepts as they apply to the process industries; and
- a chart that maps the extent and maturity of estimate input information (project definition deliverables) against the class of estimate.

As with the generic recommended practice, an intent of this addendum is to improve communications among all of the stakeholders involved with preparing, evaluating, and using project cost estimates specifically for the process industries.

The overall purpose of this recommended practice is to provide the process industry definition deliverable maturity matrix which is not provided in 17R-97. It also provides an approximate representation of the relationship of specific design input data and design deliverable maturity to the estimate accuracy and methodology used to produce the cost estimate. The estimate accuracy range is driven by many other variables and risks, so the maturity and quality of the scope definition available at the time of the estimate is not the sole determinate of accuracy; risk analysis is required for that purpose.

This document is intended to provide a guideline, not a standard. It is understood that each enterprise may have its own project and estimating processes and terminology, and may classify estimates in particular ways. This guideline provides a generic and generally acceptable classification system for process industries that can be used as a basis to compare against. This addendum should allow each user to better assess, define, and communicate their own processes and standards in the light of generally-accepted cost engineering practice.

INTRODUCTION

For the purposes of this addendum, the term process industries is assumed to include firms involved with the manufacturing and production of chemicals, petrochemicals, and hydrocarbon processing. The common thread among these industries (for the purpose of estimate classification) is their reliance on process flow diagrams (PFDs) and piping and instrument diagrams (P&IDs) as primary scope defining documents. These documents are key deliverables in determining the degree of project definition, and thus the extent and maturity of estimate input information.

Estimates for process facilities center on mechanical and chemical process equipment, and they have significant amounts of piping, instrumentation, and process controls involved. As such, this addendum may apply to portions

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of other industries, such as pharmaceutical, utility, metallurgical, converting, and similar industries. Specific addendums addressing these industries may be developed over time.

This addendum specifically does not address cost estimate classification in non-process industries such as commercial building construction, environmental remediation, transportation infrastructure, hydropower, “dry” processes such as assembly and manufacturing, “soft asset” production such as software development, and similar industries. It also does not specifically address estimates for the exploration, production, or transportation of mining or hydrocarbon materials, although it may apply to some of the intermediate processing steps in these systems.

The cost estimates covered by this addendum are for engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) work only. It does not cover estimates for the products manufactured by the process facilities, or for research and development work in support of the process industries. This guideline does not cover the significant building construction that may be a part of process plants.

This guideline reflects generally-accepted cost engineering practices. This addendum was based upon the practices of a wide range of companies in the process industries from around the world, as well as published references and standards. Company and public standards were solicited and reviewed, and the practices were found to have significant commonalities. These classifications are also supported by empirical process industry research of systemic risks and their correlation with cost growth and schedule slip^[8].

COST ESTIMATE CLASSIFICATION MATRIX FOR THE PROCESS INDUSTRIES

ESTIMATE CLASS	Primary Characteristic	Secondary Characteristic		
	MATURITY LEVEL OF PROJECT DEFINITION DELIVERABLES Expressed as % of complete definition	END USAGE Typical purpose of estimate	METHODOLOGY Typical estimating method	EXPECTED ACCURACY RANGE Typical variation in low and high ranges ^[a]
Class 5	0% to 2%	Concept screening	Capacity factored, parametric models, judgment, or analogy	L: -20% to -50% H: +30% to +100%
Class 4	1% to 15%	Study or feasibility	Equipment factored or parametric models	L: -15% to -30% H: +20% to +50%
Class 3	10% to 40%	Budget authorization or control	Semi-detailed unit costs with assembly level line items	L: -10% to -20% H: +10% to +30%
Class 2	30% to 75%	Control or bid/tender	Detailed unit cost with forced detailed take-off	L: -5% to -15% H: +5% to +20%
Class 1	65% to 100%	Check estimate or bid/tender	Detailed unit cost with detailed take-off	L: -3% to -10% H: +3% to +15%

Notes: [a] The state of process technology, availability of applicable reference cost data, and many other risks affect the range markedly. The +/- value represents typical percentage variation of actual costs from the cost estimate after application of contingency (typically at a 50% level of confidence) for given scope.

Table 1 – Cost Estimate Classification Matrix for Process Industries

Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of the five estimate classes. The maturity level of definition is the sole determining (i.e., primary) characteristic of Class. In Table 1, the maturity is roughly indicated by a % of

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complete definition; however, it is the maturity of the defining deliverables that is the determinant, not the percent. The specific deliverables, and their maturity, or status, are provided in Table 3. The other characteristics are secondary and are generally correlated with the maturity level of project definition deliverables, as discussed in the generic RP^[1]. The characteristics are typical for the process industries but may vary from application to application.

This matrix and guideline outline an estimate classification system that is specific to the process industries. Refer to the generic estimate classification RP^[1] for a general matrix that is non-industry specific, or to other addendums for guidelines that will provide more detailed information for application in other specific industries. These will provide additional information, particularly the project definition deliverable maturity matrix which determines the class in those particular industries.

Table 1 illustrates typical ranges of accuracy ranges that are associated with the process industries. Depending on the technical and project deliverables (and other variables) and risks associated with each estimate, the accuracy range for any particular estimate is expected to fall into the ranges identified (although extreme risks can lead to wider ranges).

In addition to the degree of project definition, estimate accuracy is also driven by other systemic risks such as:

- Level of non-familiar technology in the project.
- Complexity of the project.
- Quality of reference cost estimating data.
- Quality of assumptions used in preparing the estimate.
- Experience and skill level of the estimator.
- Estimating techniques employed.
- Time and level of effort budgeted to prepare the estimate.

Systemic risks such as these are often the primary driver of accuracy; however, project-specific risks (e.g. risk events) also drive the accuracy range^[3].

Another way to look at the variability associated with estimate accuracy ranges is shown in Figure 1. Depending upon the technical complexity of the project, the availability of appropriate cost reference information, the degree of project definition, and the inclusion of appropriate contingency determination, a typical Class 5 estimate for a process industry project may have an accuracy range as broad as -50% to +100%, or as narrow as -20% to +30%.

Figure 1 also illustrates that the estimating accuracy ranges overlap the estimate classes. There are cases where a Class 5 estimate for a particular project may be as accurate as a Class 3 estimate for a different project. For example, similar accuracy ranges may occur for the Class 5 estimate of one project that is based on a repeat project with good cost history and data and the Class 3 estimate for another project involving new technology. It is for this reason that Table 1 provides ranges of accuracy range values. The accuracy range is determined through risk analysis of the specific project.

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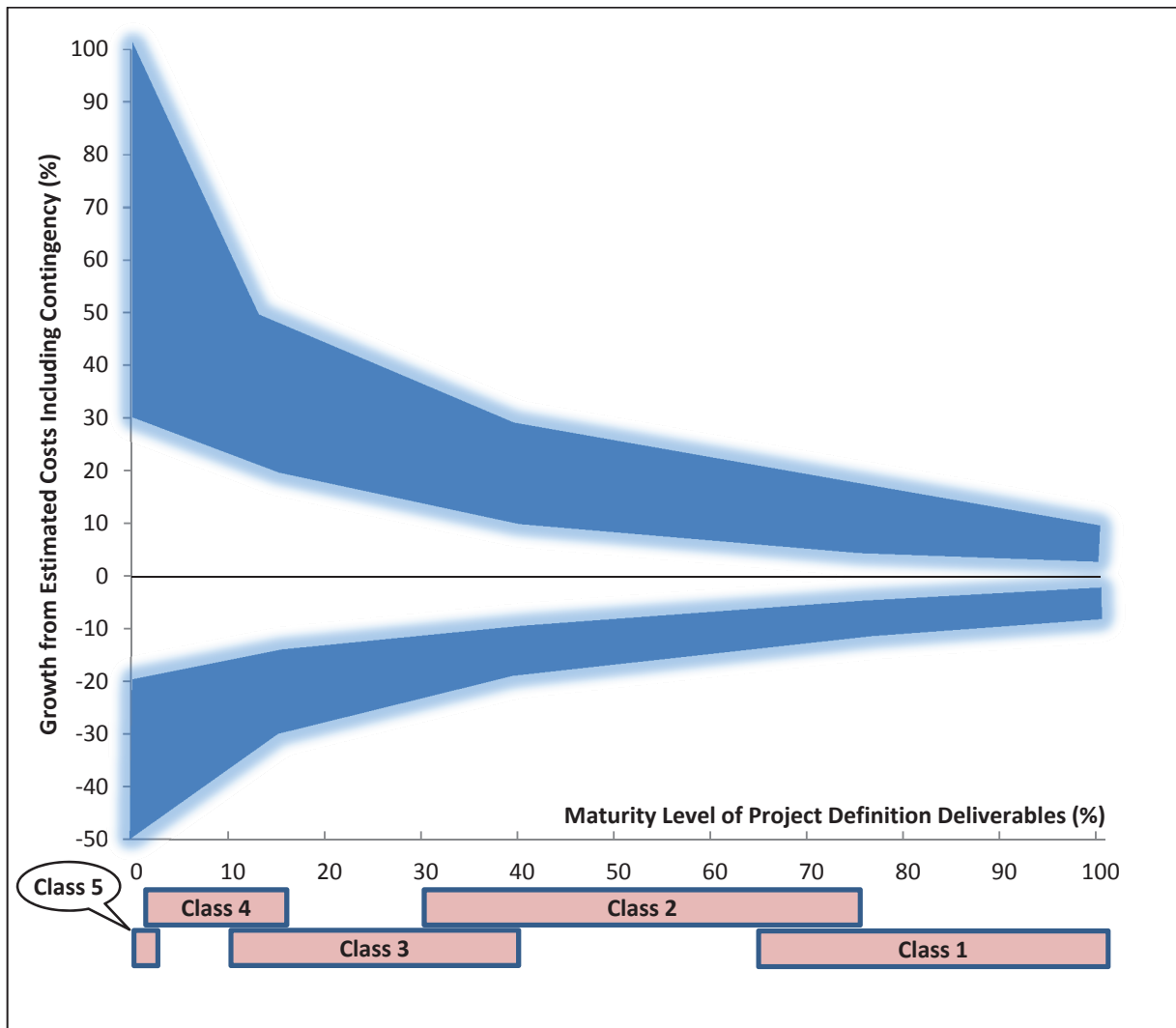


Figure 1 – Example of the Variability in Accuracy Ranges for a Process Industry Estimate

DETERMINATION OF THE COST ESTIMATE CLASS

The cost estimator makes the determination of the estimate class based upon the maturity level of project definition based on the status of specific key planning and design deliverables. The percent design completion may be correlated with the status, but the percentage should not be used as the Class determinate. While the determination of the status (and hence class) is somewhat subjective, having standards for the design input data, completeness and quality of the design deliverables will serve to make the determination more objective.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ESTIMATE CLASSES

The following tables (2a through 2e) provide detailed descriptions of the five estimate classifications as applied in the process industries. They are presented in the order of least-defined estimates to the most-defined estimates. These descriptions include brief discussions of each of the estimate characteristics that define an estimate class.

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For each table, the following information is provided:

- **Description:** a short description of the class of estimate, including a brief listing of the expected estimate inputs based on the maturity level of project definition deliverables. The “minimum” inputs reflect the range of industry experience, but would not generally be recommended.
- **Maturity Level of Project Definition Deliverables (Primary Characteristic):** Describes a particularly key deliverable and a typical target status in stage-gate decision processes, plus an indication of approximate percent of full definition of project and technical deliverables. For the process industries, this correlates with the percent of engineering and design complete.
- **End Usage (Secondary Characteristic):** a short discussion of the possible end usage of this class of estimate.
- **Estimating Methodology (Secondary Characteristic):** a listing of the possible estimating methods that may be employed to develop an estimate of this class.
- **Expected Accuracy Range (Secondary Characteristic):** typical variation in low and high ranges after the application of contingency (determined at a 50% level of confidence). Typically, this represents about 80% confidence that the actual cost will fall within the bounds of the low and high ranges. The estimate confidence interval or accuracy range is driven by the reliability of the scope information available at the time of the estimate in addition to the other variables and risk identified above.
- **Alternate Estimate Names, Terms, Expressions, Synonyms:** this section provides other commonly used names that an estimate of this class might be known by. These alternate names are not endorsed by this Recommended Practice. The user is cautioned that an alternative name may not always be correlated with the class of estimate as identified in Tables 2a-2e.

CLASS 5 ESTIMATE	
<p>Description: Class 5 estimates are generally prepared based on very limited information, and subsequently have wide accuracy ranges. As such, some companies and organizations have elected to determine that due to the inherent inaccuracies, such estimates cannot be classified in a conventional and systematic manner. Class 5 estimates, due to the requirements of end use, may be prepared within a very limited amount of time and with little effort expended—sometimes requiring less than an hour to prepare. Often, little more than proposed plant type, location, and capacity are known at the time of estimate preparation.</p> <p>Maturity Level of Project Definition Deliverables: Key deliverable and target status: Block flow diagram agreed by key stakeholders. 0% to 2% of full project definition.</p> <p>End Usage: Class 5 estimates are prepared for any number of strategic business planning purposes, such as but not limited to market studies, assessment of initial viability, evaluation of alternate schemes, project screening, project location studies, evaluation of resource needs and budgeting, long-range capital planning, etc.</p>	<p>Estimating Methodology: Class 5 estimates generally use stochastic estimating methods such as cost/capacity curves and factors, scale of operations factors, Lang factors, Hand factors, Chilton factors, Peters-Timmerhaus factors, Guthrie factors, and other parametric and modeling techniques.</p> <p>Expected Accuracy Range: Typical accuracy ranges for Class 5 estimates are -20% to -50% on the low side, and +30% to +100% on the high side, depending on the technological complexity of the project, appropriate reference information and other risks (after inclusion of an appropriate contingency determination). Ranges could exceed those shown if there are unusual risks.</p> <p>Alternate Estimate Names, Terms, Expressions, Synonyms: Ratio, ballpark, blue sky, seat-of-pants, ROM, idea study, prospect estimate, concession license estimate, guesstimate, rule-of-thumb.</p>

Table 2a – Class 5 Estimate

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CLASS 4 ESTIMATE	
<p>Description: Class 4 estimates are generally prepared based on limited information and subsequently have fairly wide accuracy ranges. They are typically used for project screening, determination of feasibility, concept evaluation, and preliminary budget approval. Typically, engineering is from 1% to 15% complete, and would comprise at a minimum the following: plant capacity, block schematics, indicated layout, process flow diagrams (PFDs) for main process systems, and preliminary engineered process and utility equipment lists.</p> <p>Maturity Level of Project Definition Deliverables: Key deliverable and target status: Process flow diagrams (PFDs) issued for design. 1% to 15% of full project definition.</p> <p>End Usage: Class 4 estimates are prepared for a number of purposes, such as but not limited to, detailed strategic planning, business development, project screening at more developed stages, alternative scheme analysis, confirmation of economic and/or technical feasibility, and preliminary budget approval or approval to proceed to next stage.</p>	<p>Estimating Methodology: Class 4 estimates generally use stochastic estimating methods such as equipment factors, Lang factors, Hand factors, Chilton factors, Peters-Timmerhaus factors, Guthrie factors, the Miller method, gross unit costs/ratios, and other parametric and modeling techniques.</p> <p>Expected Accuracy Range: Typical accuracy ranges for Class 4 estimates are -15% to -30% on the low side, and +20% to +50% on the high side, depending on the technological complexity of the project, appropriate reference information, and other risks (after inclusion of an appropriate contingency determination). Ranges could exceed those shown if there are unusual risks.</p> <p>Alternate Estimate Names, Terms, Expressions, Synonyms: Screening, top-down, feasibility (pre-feasibility for metals processes), authorization, factored, pre-design, pre-study.</p>

Table 2b – Class 4 Estimate

CLASS 3 ESTIMATE	
<p>Description: Class 3 estimates are generally prepared to form the basis for budget authorization, appropriation, and/or funding. As such, they typically form the initial control estimate against which all actual costs and resources will be monitored. Typically, engineering is from 10% to 40% complete, and would comprise at a minimum the following: process flow diagrams, utility flow diagrams, preliminary piping and instrument diagrams, plot plan, developed layout drawings, and essentially complete engineered process and utility equipment lists.</p> <p>Maturity Level of Project Definition Deliverables: Key deliverable and target status: Piping and instrumentation diagrams (P&IDs) issued for design. 10% to 40% of full project definition.</p> <p>End Usage: Class 3 estimates are typically prepared to support full project funding requests, and become the first of the project phase control estimates against which all actual costs and resources will be monitored for variations to the budget. They are used as the project budget until replaced by more detailed estimates. In many owner organizations, a Class 3 estimate is often the last estimate required and could very well form the only basis for cost/schedule control.</p>	<p>Estimating Methodology: Class 3 estimates generally involve more deterministic estimating methods than stochastic methods. They usually involve predominant use of unit cost line items, although these may be at an assembly level of detail rather than individual components. Factoring and other stochastic methods may be used to estimate less-significant areas of the project.</p> <p>Expected Accuracy Range: Typical accuracy ranges for Class 3 estimates are -10% to -20% on the low side, and +10% to +30% on the high side, depending on the technological complexity of the project, appropriate reference information, and other risks (after inclusion of an appropriate contingency determination). Ranges could exceed those shown if there are unusual risks.</p> <p>Alternate Estimate Names, Terms, Expressions, Synonyms: Budget, scope, sanction, semi-detailed, authorization, preliminary control, concept study, feasibility (for metals processes) development, basic engineering phase estimate, target estimate.</p>

Table 2c – Class 3 Estimate

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CLASS 2 ESTIMATE	
<p>Description: Class 2 estimates are generally prepared to form a detailed contractor control baseline (and update the owner control baseline) against which all project work is monitored in terms of cost and progress control. For contractors, this class of estimate is often used as the bid estimate to establish contract value. Typically, engineering is from 30% to 75% complete, and would comprise at a minimum the following: process flow diagrams, utility flow diagrams, piping and instrument diagrams, heat and material balances, final plot plan, final layout drawings, complete engineered process and utility equipment lists, single line diagrams for electrical, electrical equipment and motor schedules, vendor quotations, detailed project execution plans, resourcing and work force plans, etc.</p> <p>Maturity Level of Project Definition Deliverables: Key deliverable and target status: All specifications and datasheets complete including for instrumentation. 30% to 75% of full project definition.</p> <p>End Usage: Class 2 estimates are typically prepared as the detailed contractor control baseline (and update the owner control baseline) against which all actual costs and resources will now be monitored for variations to the budget, and form a part of the change management program.</p>	<p>Estimating Methodology: Class 2 estimates generally involve a high degree of deterministic estimating methods. Class 2 estimates are prepared in great detail, and often involve tens of thousands of unit cost line items. For those areas of the project still undefined, an assumed level of detail takeoff (forced detail) may be developed to use as line items in the estimate instead of relying on factoring methods.</p> <p>Expected Accuracy Range: Typical accuracy ranges for Class 2 estimates are -5% to -15% on the low side, and +5% to +20% on the high side, depending on the technological complexity of the project, appropriate reference information, and other risks (after inclusion of an appropriate contingency determination). Ranges could exceed those shown if there are unusual risks.</p> <p>Alternate Estimate Names, Terms, Expressions, Synonyms: Detailed control, forced detail, execution phase, master control, engineering, bid, tender, change order estimate.</p>

Table 2d – Class 2 Estimate

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CLASS 1 ESTIMATE	
<p>Description: Class 1 estimates are generally prepared for discrete parts or sections of the total project rather than generating this level of detail for the entire project. The parts of the project estimated at this level of detail will typically be used by subcontractors for bids, or by owners for check estimates. The updated estimate is often referred to as the current control estimate and becomes the new baseline for cost/schedule control of the project. Class 1 estimates may be prepared for parts of the project to comprise a fair price estimate or bid check estimate to compare against a contractor’s bid estimate, or to evaluate/dispute claims. Typically, overall engineering is from 65% to 100% complete (some parts or packages may be complete and others not), and would comprise virtually all engineering and design documentation of the project, and complete project execution and commissioning plans.</p> <p>Maturity Level of Project Definition Deliverables: Key deliverable and target status: All deliverables in the maturity matrix complete. 65% to 100% of full project definition.</p> <p>End Usage: Generally, owners and EPC contractors use Class 1 estimates to support their change management process. They may be used to evaluate bid checking, to support vendor/contractor negotiations, or for claim evaluations and dispute resolution.</p> <p>Construction contractors may prepare Class 1 estimates to support their bidding and to act as their final control baseline against which all actual costs and resources will now be monitored for variations to their bid. During construction, Class 1 estimates may be prepared to support change management.</p>	<p>Estimating Methodology: Class 1 estimates generally involve the highest degree of deterministic estimating methods, and require a great amount of effort. Class 1 estimates are prepared in great detail, and thus are usually performed on only the most important or critical areas of the project. All items in the estimate are usually unit cost line items based on actual design quantities.</p> <p>Expected Accuracy Range: Typical accuracy ranges for Class 1 estimates are -3% to -10% on the low side, and +3% to +15% on the high side, depending on the technological complexity of the project, appropriate reference information, and other risks (after inclusion of an appropriate contingency determination). Ranges could exceed those shown if there are unusual risks.</p> <p>Alternate Estimate Names, Terms, Expressions, Synonyms: Full detail, release, fall-out, tender, firm price, bottoms-up, final, detailed control, forced detail, execution phase, master control, fair price, definitive, change order estimate.</p>

Table 2e – Class 1 Estimate

ESTIMATE INPUT CHECKLIST AND MATURITY MATRIX

Table 3 maps the extent and maturity of estimate input information (deliverables) against the five estimate classification levels. This is a checklist of basic deliverables found in common practice in the process industries. The maturity level is an approximation of the completion status of the deliverable. The completion is indicated by the following letters.

- **None (blank):** development of the deliverable has not begun.
- **Started (S):** work on the deliverable has begun. Development is typically limited to sketches, rough outlines, or similar levels of early completion.
- **Preliminary (P):** work on the deliverable is advanced. Interim, cross-functional reviews have usually been conducted. Development may be near completion except for final reviews and approvals.
- **Complete (C):** the deliverable has been reviewed and approved as appropriate.

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	ESTIMATE CLASSIFICATION				
	CLASS 5	CLASS 4	CLASS 3	CLASS 2	CLASS 1
MATURITY LEVEL OF PROJECT DEFINITION DELIVERABLES	0% to 2%	1% to 15%	10% to 40%	30% to 75%	65% to 100%
General Project Data:					
Project Scope Description	General	Preliminary	Defined	Defined	Defined
Plant Production/Facility Capacity	Assumed	Preliminary	Defined	Defined	Defined
Plant Location	General	Approximate	Specific	Specific	Specific
Soils & Hydrology	None	Preliminary	Defined	Defined	Defined
Integrated Project Plan	None	Preliminary	Defined	Defined	Defined
Project Master Schedule	None	Preliminary	Defined	Defined	Defined
Escalation Strategy	None	Preliminary	Defined	Defined	Defined
Work Breakdown Structure	None	Preliminary	Defined	Defined	Defined
Project Code of Accounts	None	Preliminary	Defined	Defined	Defined
Contracting Strategy	Assumed	Assumed	Preliminary	Defined	Defined
Engineering Deliverables:					
Block Flow Diagrams	S/P	P/C	C	C	C
Plot Plans		S/P	C	C	C
Process Flow Diagrams (PFDs)		P	C	C	C
Utility Flow Diagrams (UFDs)		S/P	C	C	C
Piping & Instrument Diagrams (P&IDs)		S/P	C	C	C
Heat & Material Balances		S/P	C	C	C
Process Equipment List		S/P	C	C	C
Utility Equipment List		S/P	C	C	C
Electrical One-Line Drawings		S/P	C	C	C
Specifications & Datasheets		S	P/C	C	C
General Equipment Arrangement Drawings		S	C	C	C
Spare Parts Listings			P	P	C
Mechanical Discipline Drawings			S/P	P/C	C
Electrical Discipline Drawings			S/P	P/C	C
Instrumentation/Control System Discipline Drawings			S/P	P/C	C
Civil/Structural/Site Discipline Drawings			S/P	P/C	C

Table 3 – Estimate Input Checklist and Maturity Matrix (Primary Classification Determinate)

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