

# FORESTRY NOTES SPECIAL REPORT



National Association of  
Conservation Districts

## Community Forest Program

Communities and private landowners across the country are embracing the U.S. Forest Service's Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program (Community Forest Program), a program designed to manage private property for public access and the good of the community.

The Community Forest Program complements conservation districts' efforts to conserve and promote healthy environments, whether it is soils, water, forests or wildlife, and develop locally-driven solutions to natural resource concerns.

The program was created in the 2008 Farm Bill and implemented in 2012 to establish community-owned and managed forest land nationwide that provide public benefits. Program funding depends on Congress. In 2015-17, Congress appropriated \$2 million annually. Last year, the funding increased to \$4 million.

A community forest must be at least 75 percent forested, acquired by an eligible entity willing to provide public access, and managed according to a community forest plan to provide community benefits. These benefits may be ecological, recreational, educational and/or economic.

"Once they acquire and establish that community forest, it's all up to them," Forest Service Landowner Assistance Program Manager Brad Siemens said. "The main program requirement is to maintain the acquired land base as a community forest, but the concept really is to empower local communities to decide what benefits they want this forest to provide, and how to manage it accordingly. Management may be similar to industrial tim-



berland, it could be similar to national forest lands, or it could be similar to a local system of trails. It's up to the community."

Local conservation districts are able to join with the private landowners to assist in the Community Forest Program (CFP) in a number of ways, including technical assistance, a position on the board, or regular contact concerning land management practices. Regardless of the level of involvement, the management direction and the function of the community forest is up to those who own it.

"The ideal is the community forest governing board is large enough to have both sides of the issue at the table to work through that and find common ground," Siemens said. "It's designed for communities to enjoy the community forest as both an embodiment of their culture and an extension of their shared values."

Since 2012, the program has conserved 12,375 acres through fee-simple purchases and supported 51 community-driven projects across 21 states and territories.

## What is a community forest?

For the purposes of the program, a community forest is defined as forest land that is at least five acres in size, at least 75 percent forested, and can provide community benefits, including any of the following:

- ▶ Economic benefits such as timber and non-timber products resulting from sustainable forest management and tourism
- ▶ Environmental benefits, including clean air and water, storm water management and wildlife habitat
- ▶ Benefits from forest-based educational programs, including vocational education programs in forestry
- ▶ Benefits from serving as replicable models of effective forest stewardship for private landowners
- ▶ Recreational benefits, such as hiking, hunting and fishing



## District finds ways to assist CFP in Washington

A 2008 wildfire that began with a lightning strike on Mt. Adams and moved toward nearby rural communities sparked a movement to find innovative ways to address fire risk and protect forest health in the Mt. Adams area of southern Washington. Those conversations grew into the Mt. Adams Community Forest, which benefited from the Community Forest Program, a newer program provided through the U.S. Forest Service that has opportunities to connect with local conservation districts.

"Concerns ranged from how we could engage in public lands management, how can we grow collaborative efforts for forest treatment, and then there were these private timberland interests as well," Mt. Adams Resource Stewards Executive Director Jay McLaughlin said.

"How do we protect our working forest land base and maintain or sustain those connections our community had with an actively, sustainably managed forest?" McLaughlin said. "So that led to the community forest ownership idea. It really required a nonprofit entity to secure funds to buy it and manage it through a diverse, community-based board of directors."

Mt. Adams Resource Stewards (MARS) led a community-based effort to purchase the 90-acre Mill Pond tract as the first piece of the Mt. Adams Community Forest in 2011. This purchase was followed in 2014 by the acquisition of the 299-acre Pine Flats tract. Other acquisitions are underway, and McLaughlin is hoping the acreage will reach

1,000 by year's end.

Though there is no formal agreement in place with the local Underwood Conservation District, district personnel have been involved in the project, both through retired district manager Jim White, who serves on the MARS board, and through contact with current conservation district manager Tova Tillinghast.

"We are partners and we have a great working relationship, but MARS is really holding the reins on the community forest," Tillinghast said. "They are doing a great job with it, representing the community and making sure they have the right connections to ensure they have the management plan input that's necessary."

"We're always talking about how we can leverage each other's resources to bring the best programs to landowners," she said.

The Mt. Adams Community Forest provides jobs associated with local mills, guarantees access for traditional uses such as fishing and hunting, and also preserves the rural character of the area, which is beneficial to local residents and visitors.

There also have been economic benefits. According to a 2014-2017 economic and community development impact report released by the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) last year, the community forest has protected 389 acres of working forest land from conversion; treated 424 acres of community forest and federal lands for fuels reduction with prescribed burns, generating \$1.7 million in revenues for supporting living-wage jobs and forest stewardship efforts; recorded \$8 million in countywide economic benefits; and supplied 59 months of full-time employment opportunities created within Klickitat County.

In addition, MARS leveraged its forest management expertise to secure stewardship contracts on the adjacent 7,000-acre Conboy

Lake National Wildlife Refuge. These contracts resulted in a further six timber harvests and \$1.1 million in gross receipts and contracts.

In 2018, MARS established a stewardship work crew to undertake projects, such as tree planting, forest stand improvement work, weed control and restoration work, in addition to supporting prescribed burning operations. The crew is also available to the conservation district, so the benefits work both ways, Tillinghast said. And the conservation district utilizes its Firewise program in conjunction with MARS' fuel reduction practices and the two groups work together on meeting community needs.

MARS is also open to educational opportunities on forest management and best management practices. While MARS has existing forestry expertise in its organization, the conservation district utilizes that forestry expertise on a regular basis. Likewise, MARS may contact the conservation district for other natural resource concerns, such as hydrology or a noxious weed issue, for example, Tillinghast said.

The conservation district is also working with MARS on potential new community forest program opportunities.

"There are some other community forest prospects that we're looking into, and MARS is a ready partner in that. So we can access their expertise at the very least, but also potentially partner to co-manage or co-own," Tillinghast said. "It's very early in terms of planning out these potential projects, but the benefit of having this organization in our community is knowing we can leverage each other's strengths and continue to build partnerships that are effective and productive."

Jim Cathcart, district manager for West Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District in Portland, Ore., worked with the Oregon Department of Forestry four years ago as the manager of the department's state and private forestry cooperative programs and helped the U.S. Forest Service implement the Community Forest Program in Oregon. Though he has not had occasion to use the program yet in his conservation district capacity, he said he would not hesitate should the opportunity arise.

"I think it's in every conservation district's interest to learn about these programs and be aware of them and know when there's a potential fit," Cathcart said. "It's a great program. We develop the relationships with the landowners, we know their needs and we need to leverage that. There's a good fit with what the program is trying to do and what some landowners are trying to do, so we can be a good conduit to link those two together."



# 5 ways conservation districts can assist CFP

From the application process to providing ongoing technical assistance, conservation districts have several opportunities to participate in the Community Forest Program at different levels.

"I can see opportunities during the application process and beyond," U.S. Forest Service National Program Specialist Margee Haines said. "These forests are a permanent resource for the community and actively managed over the long-term so that they continue to provide those important values—the water and timber as well as access for hunting, fishing and hiking."

Here are five things that conservation districts can do to assist or help establish community forests in their area:

► **Engage communities and assist them in developing an application that reflects the needs and priorities of the community and draws on local knowledge.**

A significant component of a project application is how the community forest will mirror what the community desires: educational components, hiking trails, thinning for economic purposes, fire prevention, etc.

"Conservation districts have strong relationships with stakeholders whose perspectives are very valuable to bring into the visioning exercise of what a community forest may look like," U.S. Forest Service Landowner Assistance Program Manager Brad Siemens said.

► **Offer to provide technical expertise throughout the application process.**

Applications must provide information about the proposed property including a description of the current land uses, forest type and cover, applicable zoning and land use regulations affecting the property, among other details. Conservation district staff can provide knowledge and forestry expertise to applicants as they work through the application.

► **Work with the recipient of a community forest to develop the community forest plan, including providing technical assistance.**

The Community Forest Program requires a level of expertise for management.



Community Forest members may possess a particular area of expertise but be lacking in other aspects. Conservation districts can help fill in those gaps.

"A lot of projects will have retired natural resource professionals or some other expertise that already are volunteering, but there is a component under the program that if the applicant requests it, we can pay for technical support in developing the required Community Forest Plan," Siemens said.

► **Work with community forests to educate landowners about forest management through demonstrations and site visits to community forests.**

Educational benefits are one of the benefits that community forests can provide, including serving as an effective model of forest stewardship for private landowners and other types of forest-based educational programs. "There's a strong sense of grassroots issues and relationships that can be leveraged into a specific program like the community forest," Siemens said.

The Mt. Adams Community Forest in Washington and the Underwood Conservation District are looking at ways of supporting workshops and visits to provide information and education to the community, for example.

► **Provide additional resources on regulations, plan development and different options for the land use.**

Though the community forest is managed through its members, it still has to follow regulations through the state.

Conservation districts can assist with those rules and policies and help with any modifications or updates that are needed and potentially connect members to other programs or practices that may be beneficial to the community forest.



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— Brad Siemens  
U.S. Forest Service Landowner Assistance Program Manager

# COMMUNITY FOREST PROGRAM

THIS PROGRAM HELPS  
COMMUNITIES ACQUIRE  
AND ESTABLISH  
LOCALLY-MANAGED  
COMMUNITY FORESTS

where they live, recreate, and learn.



HAS CONSERVED ALMOST **12,000** ACRES IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

**1** LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT

**2** INDIAN  
TRIBES

**3** NONPROFITS

LANDS ACQUIRED THROUGH THE PROGRAM ARE  
ACTIVELY MANAGED IN ACCORDANCE WITH A  
COMMUNITY FOREST PLAN TO PROVIDE COMMUNITY BENEFITS

## ADDITIONAL MATERIALS RELATED TO COMMUNITY FOREST PROGRAM



Community Forest Program website: [www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/private-land/community-forest/projects-and-partners](http://www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/private-land/community-forest/projects-and-partners)

Community Forest Program Road Map: [www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/library/cfp\\_road\\_map.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/library/cfp_road_map.pdf)

Community Forest Program Rule: [www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/media\\_wysiwyg/cfp\\_final\\_rule.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/media_wysiwyg/cfp_final_rule.pdf)

FAQs: [www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/media\\_wysiwyg/cfp-faq-december2018.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/media_wysiwyg/cfp-faq-december2018.pdf)

