Fostering Thriving and Equitable Communities through Healthy Urban and Community Forests

Recommendations from urban and community forestry practitioners and stakeholders to the Biden Administration

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Our nation's current and expanding 138 million acres of urban forests and trees are key to addressing priorities identified by the Biden Administration. From combating climate change and creating more equitable communities to improving infrastructure and expanding green jobs, trees and forests in our cities and towns are an essential piece of the equation.

Urban forests and trees provide a multitude of scientifically proven social, economic, and environmental benefits. The ability to reduce air pollution and stormwater runoff, decrease energy consumption, mitigate the heat island effect, and improve human health are just a few of the essential services trees provide to communities. Every year, community trees and forests also provide $18.3 billion in cost savings related to reductions in air pollution, energy use, and greenhouse gases, while the tree-care industry alone generates $17 billion annually in the United States.

Key to supporting urban forests is ensuring we plant the right tree in the right place for the right purpose and maintaining those trees through the entirety of their lifespan. In addition, we must correct the current unequal distribution of trees across our cities, which is strongly correlated with race and income. We need to invest in tree equity to ensure all communities can benefit from robust tree canopy coverage.

With a projected 90% of Americans living in urbanized areas by 2050, now is the time to invest in urban forests and trees to bolster healthy, livable communities and improve the quality of life for all Americans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are recommendations for improving our communities through the maintenance and expansion of urban and community forests. The supporting groups, many of which are members of the [Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition](#), represent the multi-billion-dollar tree-care industry, state forestry professionals, a wide variety of professional associations including arborists, city planners and public works professionals, and forest, conservation, and water non-profit organizations that understand the value and return on investment of planting and maintaining trees where people live.

In addition to the recommendations below, we also encourage reestablishment of the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council to allow leaders from across the sector to provide strategic guidance to the Biden Administration.

Prioritize and ensure all communities have access to thriving urban and community forests and trees.

Urban forests not only save lives, but also can help combat climate change. Urban forests account for almost 20% of sequestration in U.S. forests (129 MMT CO2e per the 2020 EPA GHG Inventory) and also significantly lower carbon emissions by reducing energy use for cooling and heating by 7.2% nationally, saving consumers more than $7 billion and delivering significant avoided emissions benefits (Nowak et al. 2017). Current federal support for tree planting, tree care, and related workforce development amounts to approximately $50 million annually across all agencies and programs. This must be addressed—especially since federal funds from the US Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry (U&CF) program are often leveraged 2:1 (or in many cases significantly more) by states and partner organizations.

We encourage the Biden Administration to dramatically increase funding for the U&CF programs and look to current legislative vehicles for ideas on how to further integrate urban trees and forests into efforts related to job training and creation, community equity, infrastructure, energy savings, and more.

Establish Interagency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to achieve healthy and equitable tree canopy coverage through federal programs.

A concerted federal push for healthy and equitable urban and community forests would align with the Build Back Better plan, and there are many ways that different federal agencies beyond the USDA could help high-need cities and neighborhoods to plant, care for, and protect trees. Opportunities to enhance urban tree cover range from planting and maintaining trees within public spaces, such as parks (DOI), streets (DOT), public housing (HUD), and private property. The benefits provided relate to agency goals ranging from energy efficiency (DOE) to health equity (HHS) to employment for socially disadvantaged populations (DOL).

An Interagency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) directing engagement from the most potentially relevant agencies—at minimum USDA, DOI, EPA, HUD, DOT, HHS, and DOL—would catalyze the identification and implementation of strategies to increase equitable access to healthy trees and forests through existing programs and authorities. The MOU should prioritize environmental and climate justice considerations including air quality, heat island mitigation, energy burden reduction, and enhanced shading for heat-resilient housing and active transit (e.g., shading trails and bus stops).

Protect urban and community forestry investments.

Forests across the country are threatened by increasing numbers of insects and disease pathogens introduced from abroad and entering this country through urban ports. As a result, municipal governments across the US are spending an estimated $2.4 billion each year to remove trees on city property killed by non-native pests. Homeowners are spending an additional $1 billion to remove and replace trees on their properties and are absorbing an additional $1.5 billion in reduced property values. In recent years, new pests such as the spotted lanternfly, South American palm weevil, rapid ohia death, and beech

leaf disease threaten new areas.

Most infestations are first identified in cities (e.g., Asian longhorned beetle in Worcester, MA), especially port cities where international trade—a primary vector for insects and pathogens—is prevalent. These pests then spread to rural and wildland forests, where the full spectrum of forest values is at risk. By investing in programs that build capacity for local urban forest managers through early detection and rapid response, the risk of widespread canopy loss can be minimized. Furthermore, investments in tree monitoring and maintenance programs will improve tree health, thereby lessening our tree canopy's susceptibility to these insects and diseases, many of which attack unhealthy trees first. These investments in prevention and early detection can save millions of trees and billions of dollars.

A second USDA agency, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), has principal responsibility for preventing such introductions and responding rapidly to those that occur. Effective protection of urban forests requires strengthening APHIS' enforcement policies and enhancing resources devoted to containing emerging outbreaks.

Create more job opportunities in urban and community forestry.

The need for skilled labor to manage and care for trees has never been higher. With the current pandemic and resulting economic crisis, urban forestry has the potential to put tens of thousands of people to work quickly. There are tens of thousands of such job opportunities in communities large and small across the country for local workers—jobs that cannot be shipped elsewhere. Investing in job training programs will help people find work and continue to increase the return on investment for the trees in our communities. In addition to skilled labor opportunities, there are numerous entry-level positions available to help bolster communities. As populations expand, the need for urban and community forests increases, as does the need for trained individuals to help develop and maintain healthy and resilient forests in communities of all sizes.

The Build Back Better plan proposes a Civilian Climate Corps that would invest in good paying-jobs while putting a diverse generation of Americans to work on bolstering community resilience and addressing climate change. We urge the Biden Administration to implement the Civilian Climate Corps and scale the existing network of Service and Conservation Corps to plant millions of trees to reduce heat stress in urban neighborhoods.

Include urban and community forests and trees in all infrastructure investments.

Investing in America's infrastructure is an important priority for the Biden Administration. The benefits of natural capital resources, including urban forests and trees, will enhance communities and augment the value of other types of infrastructure. Trees offer flexible and cost-effective solutions to a wide variety of infrastructure-related issues. For example, green infrastructure investments can help address stormwater runoff as streets are being repaved, protect water quality while relieving pressure on aging wastewater utilities, and serve as sound barriers between communities and highways or railroads to improve safety and quality of life. In addition, adding trees to the landscape of new and upgraded housing

increases property values. Integrating urban and community forests into infrastructure projects will help reduce costs, increase revenue, and strengthen our communities.

Bolster public health benefits through increased investment in urban and community forests.

Public health is a national issue—asthma, obesity, and heart disease are just some of the chronic illnesses plaguing our cities and towns. Research has shown that tree-lined parks and large numbers of trees along streets help to reduce these illnesses by reducing air pollution and encouraging more exercise, thus reducing health care costs. Trees and greenspace in our communities provide physical and mental benefits for individuals, from youth to the elderly, by reducing stress. Overall, evidence indicates that exposure to green spaces could result in a multitude of health benefits and reduced mortality, with studies associating green spaces with reduced cardiovascular disease, better mental health, immune system benefits, and improved pregnancy outcomes ([Rojas-Rueda et al. 2019](#)).

Increasing public and private investment in urban and community forests will help improve these public health issues, while also providing economic and social benefits that increase the overall well-being of families and communities throughout the United States.

Invest in Research and Development.

Improving the health and maximizing the economic, social, and environmental benefits of our nation's trees requires a strong investment in the USDA Forest Service Research and Development (R&D) program. The Forest Service R&D program provides critical financial support for urban forestry research activities to develop information and tools for understanding conditions and trends in our nation's urban and community forests. Forest Service researchers have made huge strides in recent years through collaborative efforts to develop new tools—such as i-Tree—for mapping current tree cover, evaluating tree health, assessing trends, developing local strategies, and building greater understanding of the environmental, economic, and social services that trees and forests provide to communities.

Among the major research challenges facing R&D is the destruction of our nation's urban forests caused by non-native insects and diseases. The health of rural and wildland forests depends on proactive tree health monitoring and on Forest Service R&D creating and enhancing tools for pest detection and protective strategies, including chemical and biological controls and breeding of trees resistant to pests.

We urge the Biden Administration to reject past cuts to the Forest Service R&D program and to build capacity to address growing threats and capitalize on opportunities. Additional federal investments are also needed to implement new tools and to continue strengthening efforts to integrate urban forest data into the Forest Inventory and Analysis program so that its critical data-collection efforts address all our nation's forests.

Supporting Organizations

National Organizations
Alliance for Community Trees
American Forests
American Society of Consulting Arborists
American Society of Landscape Architects
Arbor Day Foundation
Bartlett Tree Experts
Center for Invasive Species Prevention
Corazon Latino
Davey Resource Group
Dudek
Green Infrastructure Center Inc.
Hyphae Design Laboratory
Inland Urban Forest Council
International Society of Arboriculture
J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.
Keep America Beautiful
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of Landscape Professionals
National Association of State Foresters
National Wildlife Federation
Outdoor Power Equipment Institute
PlanIT Geo
Professional Grounds Management Society
Savatree, LLC
Society of American Foresters
Society of Municipal Arborists
Student Conservation Association
The Davey Tree Expert Company
The Keystone Concept
The Nature Conservancy
Torrice Media
Tree Care Industry Association
TREE Fund
Tree PAC
Urban Canopy Works, LLC
Water Environment Federation

Wildlife Habitat Council

State and Regional Affiliates
1000 Friends of Wisconsin
Aesculus Arboricultural Consulting
Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley
Amigos de los Rios
Audubon Washington
Baltimore Tree Trust
California Institute of Environmental Design and Management
California ReLeaf
California Urban Forests Council
Canopy
Casey Trees
Chicago Region Trees Initiative
City of Albany, CA
City of Billings, MT PRPL, Forestry Division
City of Des Moines, IA
DePaul University
Eastside Audubon Society
Field Museum of Natural History
Fresno Metro Black Chamber of Commerce
Friends of Seattle's Urban Forest
Garden Club of Back Bay
Holden Forests & Gardens, Cleveland, Ohio
Huntington Beach Tree Society, Inc
Illinois Urban Wood
Indiana University
Kenneth A. Knight Consulting
Kentucky Arborists' Association
Leibman Associates, Inc.
Lowell Parks and Conservation Trust
Maryland Forestry Foundation
Mid Atlantic Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture (MAC-ISA)
Minnesota Shade Tree Advisory Committee
Nebraska Forest Service
New Jersey Tree Foundation
Northeast Organic Farming Association of Rhode Island
Oakland Landscape Committee
PanorArbor LLC
Pilchuck Audubon Society

ReLeaf Michigan, Inc.
Sacramento Tree Foundation
Santa Clara Valley Water District
Seattle Audubon
Speak for the Trees, Boston
Sustainable Saratoga
Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation & Youth Programs
Talbot Ecological Land Care
The City University of New York
The Nature Consortium
Thornton Creek Alliance
Town of Southern Pines
TreeCircus
Tree Fresno
Tree Pittsburgh
Trees Atlanta
Trees for Honolulu's Future
Trees Knoxville
TreesLouisville
TreeUtah
University of Maryland Extension
University of Vermont
Up With Trees
Urban Ecosystem Restorations
Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program
Virginia State University
West Virginia Land Trust
Woodstock, Virginia Tree Board