

Forestry leaders scramble to turn massive new funding into trees

October 6 2022, by Alex Brown



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Foresters, nursery managers and urban planners have long sought funding to grow more trees, replant burned areas and help marginalized communities prepare for the effects of climate change.

Suddenly, the money isn't the problem—it's figuring out how to spend it.

"We went from a dripping faucet to a tsunami wave," said Kasten Dumroese, national nursery specialist and research plant physiologist with the U.S. Forest Service. "It's exhilarating and terrifying at the same time."

That "[tsunami wave](#)" comes from a pair of bills signed by President Joe Biden in November 2021 and August of this year. The infrastructure and climate packages set aside billions of dollars to reforest millions of acres, plant trees in underserved communities, restore landscapes burned by wildfire, revitalize nursery programs and rehabilitate mined lands.

The funding is designed to address the loss of forest landscape caused by wildfires, drought, disease and pests. Forests are threatened by climate change, and some leaders are paying increased attention to the vital role they play in sequestering carbon and providing "green infrastructure" in urban areas.

Several federal agencies will oversee distribution of the money, via competitive grants in some cases and state-by-state allotments in others. Many of the new programs are designed to run over a 10-year period.

The money will fortify [federal agencies](#), states, tribes, local governments and [private landowners](#). And at all levels, officials are scrambling to get ready to put the dollars into action. Last week, many of those leaders met in Missoula, Montana, for a conference on reforestation organized by the Western Forest and Conservation Nursery Association, the Intertribal Nursery Council and Intermountain Container Seedling Growers.

Agency officials and industry leaders told attendees that the surge in funding will require commensurate investments up and down the "reforestation pipeline." After all, nursery managers can't grow more

trees if they don't first collect more seeds. Growers can't put all their seedlings on the landscape if forest owners don't have the right incentives to plant more trees. None of those efforts can scale up without serious workforce investments. And one kink in that pipeline could stall the whole effort.

"We've got the money now, but we don't have the infrastructure or the people in place," said Peggy Olwell, who leads the federal Bureau of Land Management's Plant Conservation Program, speaking broadly about the forestry community.

Olwell said her agency alone will need to procure roughly 1 billion pounds of seed for revegetation efforts, a "conservative estimate." Some are produced through investments in seed orchards, while others must be collected by climbers who scale trees in the wild.

Research by the nonprofit groups American Forests and The Nature Conservancy found that more than 130 million acres—including lands burned by wildfire or once used for agriculture—in the United States have the potential to be reforested. But even getting halfway to that target by 2040 would require 3 billion seedlings a year—far more than the 1.3 billion grown today.

Federal agencies are starting to roll out plans to distribute the funding enacted in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which Biden signed last November. One measure removes the cap on the Reforestation Trust Fund, a program to plant trees in national forests that was previously limited to \$30 million annually. Backers thought the provision would quadruple the program, funded by a tariff on imported wood and timber products, but the fund has quickly swelled to past \$300 million, said Danielle Okst, director of policy with the Council of Western State Foresters.

"All the focus on reforestation begs the question, where will all the trees come from?" she asked.

Forestry leaders must contend with labor shortages, limited infrastructure and nursery closures to ensure the tree-planting money has its intended effect, Okst said.

The infrastructure law also includes \$200 million for a national revegetation effort, much of it on federal lands but including \$60 million for state and private forestry.

Another \$1 billion will pay for forest treatment work such as prescribed burns and thinning projects. States and tribes also will receive support for their nursery programs, with \$7 million available this year.

Another outlay puts more than \$11 billion toward restoring abandoned mine lands, which will include reforestation efforts.

Meanwhile, the Inflation Reduction Act signed by Biden in August provides \$1.5 billion to support trees as green infrastructure in urban areas and underserved communities. It also includes conservation incentives for private forest landowners, along with funding to protect [old-growth forests](#) and to reduce wildfire risk on federal lands.

Many of the programs in the bills are still being developed, but some early funding opportunities have gotten states scrambling.

"The Forest Service is trying to push money out to states, and our partners are saying, 'Hold on a sec, we have to get more people in place so we can accept this money,'" said Dumroese, of the U.S. Forest Service.

States need [skilled workers](#) to put the money to use, said Nabil

Khadduri, nursery scientist with the Washington Department of Natural Resources' Webster Forest Nursery.

"Nurseries have a lot of attention on them right now, and a lot of resources coming our way," he said. "We need to invest in the nursery workforce, because it's people who are going to manage that infrastructure and run that equipment."

Washington's program has been left with "big holes" in its workforce as a swath of veteran staffers have reached retirement age, Khadduri said. It's had to increase salaries beyond inflation and invest in internship programs to meet staffing needs.

Matthew Aghai has a leadership role with a pair of forestry companies, serving as general manager of Silvaseed and vice president of biological research and development with DroneSeed. He noted that most forestry labor, especially the "truly backbreaking" work of planting trees, is carried out by H-2B visa holders, who are foreign nationals working in temporary non-agricultural jobs. If growers increase production to the reforestation target of 3 billion seedlings a year, the number of foreign workers required to plant them will far exceed current visa caps.

Land management agencies and timber companies, Aghai said, may have to provide better wages and amenities such as on-site lodging. He noted the success of reforestation efforts led by Civilian Conservation Corps crews in the 1930s and '40s.

"Having a mission and fair compensation is the bare minimum," he said.

Despite the newfound challenges of administering billions of dollars in funding, forestry leaders expressed confidence that they would capitalize on the possibilities presented by the investment.

"We have an unprecedented opportunity with all these different pots of money," Dumroese said. "Once we've got this mastered, we could ride this tsunami of funding for a long time and have some fun with it."

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Citation: Forestry leaders scramble to turn massive new funding into trees (2022, October 6) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-10-forestry-leaders-scramble-massive-funding.html>

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