



American Reinvestment and Recovery Act



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## Forest Service Evaluation and Review Process for ARRA Projects Selection

ARRA authorizes \$ 1.15 billion for Forest Service projects: \$650,000,000 in funds for Capitol Improvement and Maintenance (CIM) projects and \$500,000,000 for Wildland Fire Management (WFM) projects on Federal and non-federal lands.

CIM projects include: Abandoned Mine Lands Remediation; Facility Improvement, Maintenance, and Rehabilitation; Facility-Related Ecosystem /Watershed Enhancements related to road and trail maintenance; and Roads and Trails Maintenance and Decommissioning.

WFM projects on Federal lands and in cooperation with States, local governments, tribes, and private lands owners on their lands include: Ecosystem Restoration, Research, and Rehabilitation; Forest Health and Invasive Species Protection; Hazardous Fuels Reduction Activities; State Fire Assistance Projects; Biomass Utilization Grants; and Wood-to-Energy Grants.

### Project Solicitation

The Chief of the Forest Service issued direction for project submission on February 11, 2009 requesting that projects for ARRA funding meet as many of these criteria as possible:

- Create or retain jobs in economically distressed areas.
- Create or retain sustainable jobs.
- Create or retain jobs that help sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands.
- Leverage other resources to create more jobs.
- Create jobs that invest in or leverage the investments of partners, in wood-to-energy or biomass projects, or other Administration initiatives intended to help transform urban and rural economies.
- Create jobs that contribute to sustainable operations, including reducing footprint of infrastructure and/or greener operations of administrative and recreation sites, roads, trails, fire and other facilities.

### Evaluation and Review Process

#### Primary Requirements

- To ensure the selected projects met the criteria described above, a map tool was used to assist in project reviews.
- The key map layers used were: economic distress; fire risk (WFM only); and insect and disease risk (WFM only).

#### Technical Review

- A Deputy Area Point of Contact (POC) in each of the three Deputy Areas --National Forest System (NFS); State and Private (SPF); and Research and Development (R&D) --led the technical review of projects meeting primary requirements.
- Each Deputy Area used a rating system to evaluate individual projects in each of the major categories in terms of the project's contributions to primary requirements and their ability to contribute to the intent of The Act.

**WFM Rating** – conducted by SPF and R&D Deputy Area POCs.

These two Deputy Areas developed a composite map to evaluate the projects. The composite map layer included:

- Wildland Fire Potential (25% weight),
- Insect and Disease Opportunities (25% weight)
- Economic Indicators primarily driven by unemployment data (50% weight)

Each county in the nation was then rated and ranked using a composite of established economic criteria and ecological data and received a composite score between 0 and 100.

WFM-Federal lands project proposals also considered: jobs creation; start time and duration; readiness; regional priorities; contributions to changes in land condition; and potential for stewardship contracting.

WFM-State and Private lands project proposals were additionally reviewed for fit with the intent of the law. In order to meet the ARRA objectives for SPF, proposals that could be accomplished using normally appropriated funding were avoided including: wildland fire suppression; volunteer fire assistance; purchase of wildland fire suppression equipment; inventory and monitoring activities; landscaping; new facilities construction; and general education and training.

Biomass and wood-to-energy grant projects were also reviewed against the following merit criteria: technical feasibility, job creation, economic depression of identified counties, supply conflicts, and readiness (timing).

**CIM Rating** – conducted by NFS Deputy Area POC

The determination of how and where ARRA funds for CIM were to be distributed was based on criteria that would insure projects:

- fully met the intent of ARRA,
- would produce jobs located in the areas of the most economic distress,
- would result in significant natural resource benefits and reduce future operating costs, specifically costs of land management or deferred maintenance, and
- would project capacity to benefit a diverse array of workers.

#### **Preliminary Decisions by Executive Leadership Team (ELT) for Investment of ARRA Funds**

ELT made preliminary project selections based on the overall project mix to assure that selected projects:

- Met the requirements of ARRA.
- Created or retained jobs in areas of most economic distress.
- Resulted in resource benefits; addressed fire potential; addressed insect and disease issues; and/or reduced future costs.

WFM programs of work on State and Private lands will be largely delivered through State and Tribal partners through Federal Financial Assistance Agreements. ELT reviewed proposed programs of work, but specific project decisions will be made by State and Tribal partners.

## SELECTION OF PROJECTS

Forest Service made every effort to select projects to be fully consistent with and fully implement the Recovery Act. These efforts were done to manage efficiently and effectively, preserve and create jobs to promote economic recovery, assist those most impacted by the recession, address infrastructure and energy use issues; protect the environment; reduce the risk of wildfire; encourage the development and use of woody biomass; and support youth programs, Job Corps and Tribal needs. As discussed above, the agency developed selection criteria including economic distress rankings to put Recovery Act funds to work to assist those most impacted by the recession. To meet these expectations, projects were selected to:

- Expeditiously create jobs using a “shovel ready” ready strategy for projects that could be implemented shortly after the passage of the Recovery Act (“commencing expenditures and activities as quickly as possible”—Recovery Act).
- Support Tribes and improve Tribal Lands as directed by the Recovery Act (“partnerships with Federal, State, local, tribal or non-profit groups that serve young adults”— Recovery Act). Economic data for Tribes is frequently not well represented in the Bureau of Labor Statistics information but Tribes do experience severe unemployment according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.
- Ensure efficiency and effectiveness of Forest Service monitoring and implementation. Once significant sets of projects were selected, some Forest Service units discovered they were facing a saturation of operating capacity that could possibly jeopardize project execution; therefore, selections were focused in other areas. To select projects where the Agency had an inability to implement or monitor the projects would have violated a general principle of the Recovery Act (“agencies shall manage and expend the funds made available in this Act so as to achieve the purposes specified in subsection (a), including commencing expenditures and activities as quickly as possible consistent with prudent management.”— Recovery Act).
- Support Job Corps and youth programs as directed by the Recovery Act (“the Secretary of Agriculture shall utilize, where practicable, the Public Lands Corps, Youth Conservation Corps, Student Conservation Association, Job Corps and other related partnerships”— Recovery Act).
- Improve related watershed restoration and ecosystem enhancement projects in areas that are related to Capital Improvement and Maintenance projects. These watershed restoration and ecosystem enhancement projects are provided for in the Recovery Act (“including related watershed restoration and ecosystem enhancement projects”— Recovery Act).
- Meet or exceed new requirements to reduce the Agency’s environmental footprint through improved energy efficiency, lowering the use of renewable resources, conserving water, and reduce energy consumption through solar energy and use of woody biomass heating systems. These projects foster the rapid development and deployment of green technologies in general and offer job experiences to people interested in green jobs into the future.
- Improve energy security and enhance economic development across rural communities in woody biomass utilization that will lower the use of renewable resources, increase the use of woody biomass for heating and other systems, and support the development of businesses using biomass while restoring forest lands.

Given this approach the Forest Service was able to focus recovery funding (over 90 percent) in the areas found to be most impacted by the recession as estimated by applying the selection criteria for economic distress developed by the Agency. These projects will enhance the restoration of our forest resources while meeting the needs for a forest economy that creates jobs and vibrant rural communities and improve collaboration for conservation across forest and farmlands in all ownerships.

In summary, the Forest Service made project selections consistent with the Act (to manage efficiently and effectively; preserve and create jobs to promote economic recovery; assist those most impacted by the recession; address infrastructure and energy use issues; protect the environment; reduce the risk of wildfire; encourage the development and use of woody biomass; and support youth programs, Job Corps and Tribal needs). These selections remain consistent with the USDA selection process and the Act to ensure that projects:

- Met the requirements of ARRA.
- Created or retained jobs in areas of most economic distress.
- Resulted in resource benefits; addressed fire potential; addressed insect and disease issues; and/or reduced future costs.

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