



Initial Report to Congress for the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law
Section 40808

November 15, 2022



FOREST SERVICE &
NATURAL RESOURCES
CONSERVATION SERVICE

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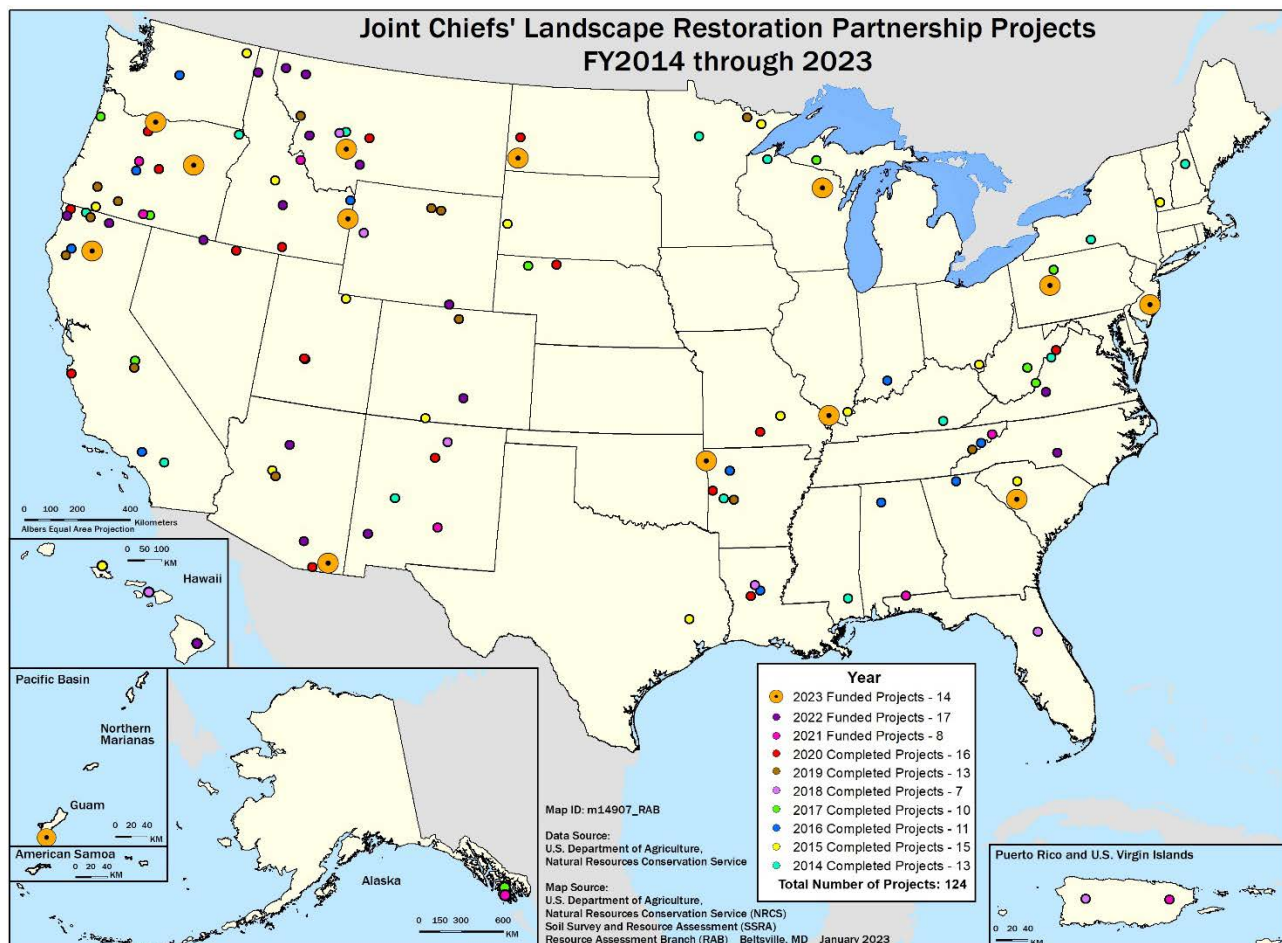
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Executive Summary

The Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership (Joint Chiefs) program is a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve the health and resilience of forest landscapes across all lands. The program aims to reduce wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protect water quality and supply, and improve wildlife habitat for at-risk species across National Forest System lands and State, Tribal, and private lands. By leveraging the technical and financial resources of both NRCS and the Forest Service, as well as a diverse group of partners, this coordinated effort has led to a strong nine-year history of promoting critical management work across boundaries.

Since 2014, the NRCS and the Forest Service have allocated a total of \$384 million to fund 124 projects across the nation to benefit forest health and help protect communities (Figure 1). Collectively, Joint Chiefs projects have restored forest health and reduced hazardous fuels on more than 1.3 million acres of public and private lands. Targeted investments from the program have been key to jumpstarting new collaborative organizations that sustain and advance forest restoration objectives throughout the country.

Figure 1: Map of Joint Chiefs Funded Project Locations From 2014 through 2023



Objectives

Report Objectives

The Joint Chiefs program began as a discretionary initiative between the Chiefs of NRCS and the Forest Service in fiscal year (FY) 2014. The Joint Chiefs program was codified upon enactment of the FY 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act ([Public Law. No: 117-58](#)), also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL).

The BIL states that the Secretary of Agriculture shall submit to Congress a report providing recommendations to Congress relating to the Program, including a review of—

- (A) funding mechanisms for the Program;
- (B) staff capacity to carry out the Program;
- (C) privacy laws applicable to the Program;
- (D) data collection under the Program;
- (E) monitoring and outcomes under the Program; and
- (F) such other matters as the Secretary considers to be appropriate.

Program Objectives

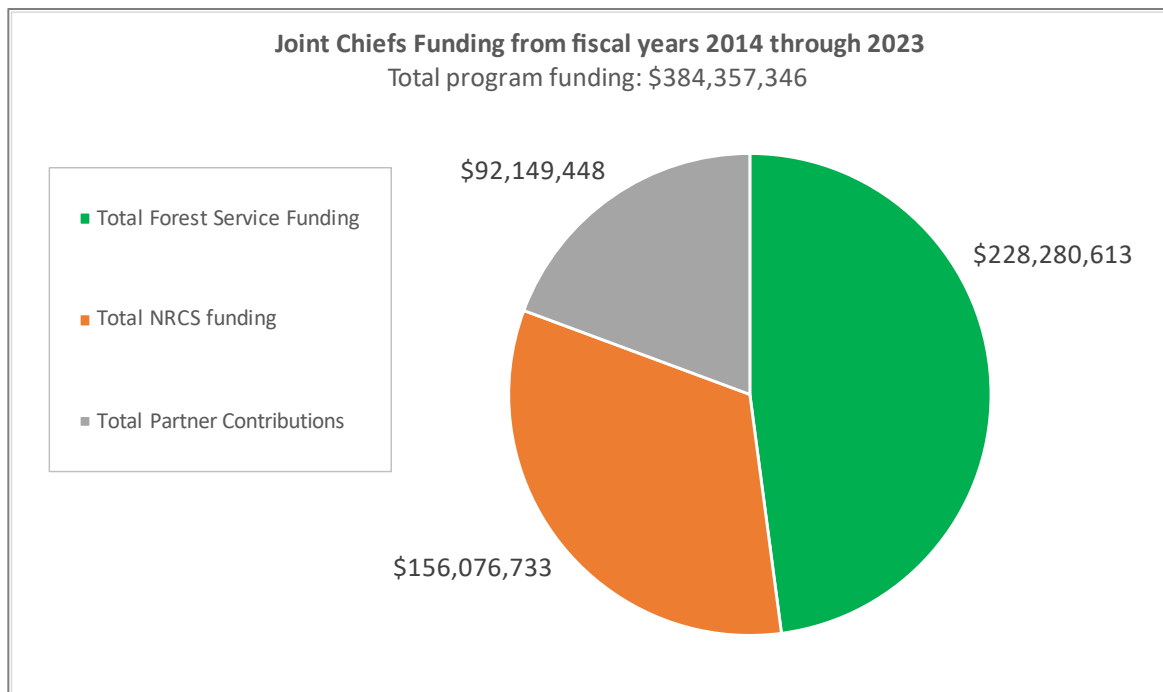
The objectives of the Joint Chiefs program are to (1) reduce the risk of wildfire; (2) protect water quality and supply; and (3) improve wildlife habitat for at-risk species. A project may include one, two, or all three objectives. New projects are solicited and selected annually and are funded for up to three years.

Collectively, the Joint Chiefs projects are investing in coordinated restoration activities at a large enough scale to make a positive impact on the landscape. The targeted, landscape-scale approach of the Joint Chiefs program is increasing the pace and scale of hazardous fuels reduction and forest restoration treatments. These projects are achieving multiple additional benefits, which include supporting jobs, industry, and infrastructure, as well as advancing equity, improving habitat, and protecting water quality and supply.

Section 40808 (g)(1)(A) Funding Mechanisms for the Program

NRCS funds projects through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program¹ (EQIP) and has allocated \$156.1 million to Joint Chiefs projects since 2014 (Figure 2); an average of \$15.6 million per year. The BIL authorized appropriations to the Secretary to carry out the program of \$90,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2022 and 2023 of which not less than 40% shall be allocated to NRCS. However, a separate appropriation under the BIL has not been made. Until these authorized funds are appropriated by Congress, NRCS will continue to use EQIP funds to carry out the program.

Figure 2: Joint Chiefs project funding source from fiscal years 2014 through 2023



The Forest Service has allocated \$228.3 million to Joint Chiefs projects since 2014; an average of \$22.8 million per year. The Forest Service allocates regular appropriations in Hazardous Fuels and other National Forest System authorities to fund restoration work limited to National Forest System lands. State, Private, and Tribal Forestry prior year funding, when available, can be used, in part, to complete Joint Chiefs work on state, private, and tribal lands for expenses of cooperating with, and providing technical and financial assistance to, those partners. The BIL authorized appropriations to the Secretary to carry out the program of \$90,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2022 and 2023 of which not less than 40% shall be allocated to the Forest Service. However, a separate appropriation under the BIL has not been made. Until these authorized funds are appropriated by Congress, the Forest Service will continue to use discretionary appropriations to carry out the program.

¹ The Environmental Quality Incentives Program is a conservation program that assists farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners integrate conservation strategies into working lands. Additional information can be found at: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/eqip-environmental-quality-incentives>.

Additional funding for Joint Chiefs projects comes from independent financial or in-kind contributions from project partners. Since 2014, partners have contributed a total of \$92.1 million to Joint Chiefs projects; an average of \$9.2 million per year.

Section 40808 (g)(1)(B) Staff Capacity to Carry Out the Program

The NRCS administers the private lands portion of the Joint Chiefs program with one national coordinator who manages the reporting requirements, proposal evaluation, budget, and policy guidance associated with NRCS's implementation of the Joint Chiefs program. Implementation of each project is directed by the respective state and field office staff who proposed the project.

The Forest Service administers the Joint Chiefs program on National Forest System lands and other public lands with one national coordinator who manages the reporting requirements, proposal evaluation, budget, and policy guidance associated with the Forest Service's implementation of the Joint Chiefs program. Each Forest Service region has one or more regional leads who, as a collateral duty, coordinate the Joint Chiefs projects within their respective regions. Implementation of each project is directed by district, forest, or regional office staff who proposed the project.

The NRCS and Forest Service national coordinators collaborate on all aspects of the national program implementation, including proposal solicitation, evaluation, reporting, and long-term planning in the program. NRCS and Forest Service personnel also collaborate at the regional, state, forest, and district levels to implement Joint Chiefs projects across boundaries.

Section 40808 (g)(1)(C) Privacy Laws Applicable to the Program

The NRCS abides by the regulations in the Privacy Act of 1974 and the privacy provisions in the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Farm Bill). For the Forest Service, there are no privacy laws specifically applicable to the Joint Chiefs program as it functions in the Forest Service.

Section 40808 (g)(1)(D) Data Collection Under the Program

Since 2014, data collection under Joint Chiefs is coordinated annually by NRCS and the Forest Service. Each agency collects standard activity data under their existing program authorities, which becomes part of their respective agency databases. Additionally, all active Joint Chiefs projects are required to submit an annual report of accomplishments and lessons learned over the past year. Completed Joint Chiefs projects provide information on total accomplishments, partnership successes, funds obligated, and barriers to implementation to help evaluate the effectiveness of their project.

Standard Agency Data Collection

The following Joint Chiefs project data is also collected annually.

- Funds obligated to date, including (1) NRCS EQIP financial and technical assistance and additional EQIP contributions from states; (2) Forest Service Hazardous Fuels, National Forest System, State, Private, and Tribal Forestry, and non-Joint Chiefs funds; and (3) other funds from partner investments.
- Total acres of Hazardous Fuels treatments.

- Total miles of streambank that were improved.
- Total acres of wildlife habitat that were improved or created.
- Land ownership type treated (i.e., Federal, state or other non-Federal, tribal, or private).
- Descriptions of wildfire mitigation and conservation success stories, community benefits, barriers to implementation, partnerships (after third year only), landscape-scale coordination (after third year only), and lessons learned (third year only).
- Additional data as appropriate, including photos of the project site.

Section 40808 (g)(1)(E) Monitoring and Outcomes Under the Program

Each Joint Chiefs project proposal includes a description of how they plan to monitor and evaluate the success of the project. This information is provided as a monitoring question designed specifically for each one of their project objectives. The project proposal also identifies the data that would be collected to answer the monitoring question. These data are collected before, during, and immediately after the project concludes. This focused monitoring approach provides an initial evaluation of project success and helps establish a monitoring baseline while working within the funds available during the three-year timespan of a project. Post-completion monitoring after year three of a project is not currently funded or required but is encouraged.

Section 40808 (g)(1)(F) Other Appropriate Matters

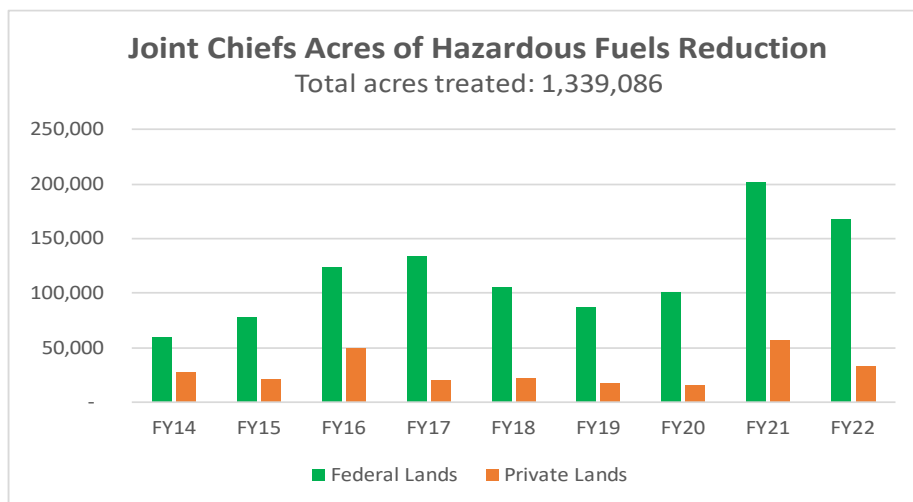
Reducing the Risk of Uncharacteristic Wildfire

Fuels reduction treatments² are commonly used in Joint Chiefs projects. These treatments protect communities, municipal watersheds, and water supplies, while providing wood products and jobs to local economies. Through strategic and collaborative treatment of hazardous fuels, the Joint Chiefs program has helped reduce the risk of community exposure to catastrophic wildfires on more than 1.3 million acres since 2014; including 1.1 million acres of Federal lands and 262,000 acres of private lands (Figure 3). Treatments are prioritized in high or very high fire risk areas through analysis of firesheds, Community Wildfire Protection Plans, or State Forest Action Plans.

Compared to the program's first seven years, the pace of treatments is beginning to increase due to USDA's renewed emphasis on fire risk reduction with the national Wildfire Crisis Strategy which was launched in January 2022, as well as increased appropriations from Congress for fuels reduction.

² Examples of fuels reduction treatments include thinning dense stands of trees, prescribed burning, pruning, and mechanical understory treatments, such as mastication or mowing.

Figure 3: Acres of hazardous fuels reduction by Joint Chiefs projects, by fiscal year



Private lands

On private lands, since 2014 Joint Chief projects have contracted with private landowners to implement NRCS conservation practices to treat thousands of acres of private lands, including (1) creating more than 1,000 miles of firebreaks³; (2) prescribed fires on nearly 100,000 acres of private lands; and (3) implementation of more than 60,000 acres of brush management.



Figure 4: Uncontrolled Wildfire

Figure 5: Prescribed Burn in Colorado



Recent Impacts

Recent record-setting fire seasons have shown numerous interactions between wildfire and Joint Chiefs-funded treatments. To describe recent successes, between 2019 and 2022 Joint Chiefs projects helped to protect more than twenty communities throughout eight states in the western and midwestern U.S.

³ A firebreak is a barrier, such as an area of open space, to prevent the spread of fire.

Projects reduced wildfire risk to people, prevented millions of dollars' worth of damage, and protected water supplies and infrastructure. Moreover, at least thirteen Joint Chiefs projects have improved wildfire suppression efforts since 2019, allowing for more effective control of wildfires. Firebreaks and fuels reduction treatments have reduced wildfire intensity and created control points, allowing for more effective firefighting operations and increasing safety for firefighters and the public. Please see Appendix A for a table showing recent successes by Joint Chiefs projects that have helped suppress wildfires and protect communities.

Species Habitat

Since 2014, Joint Chiefs projects have improved more than 660,000 acres of wildlife habitat for at-risk species across public and private lands. Activities include controlling invasive species and propagating native species. Wildlife benefited include big game such as deer and elk, federally listed species, such as the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker and Canada lynx.

Water Quality

Joint Chiefs projects have protected more than 3,000 miles of streambank and shoreline through activities like hardscaping, riprap installation, and erosion reduction measures. Projects have also improved more than 60 miles of riparian corridors by installing aquatic organism passage (AOP) structures. In combination with fuels reduction treatments to protect watersheds from catastrophic wildfires, Joint Chiefs treatments have helped maintain water quality and supply for downstream communities and fish like salmon and trout.

Partner Contributions

Each Joint Chiefs project collaborates with multiple partners to leverage resources and funding opportunities that focus on shared restoration goals across the landscape. These collective actions build relationships between stakeholders and enhance support in local communities for continuing forest restoration (Charnley et al., 2020).⁴ Joint Chiefs project collaboratives also attract additional funding, build skills and knowledge, and promote efficiency across the public and private partnership.

Partners vary by project, but common partners include the following:

- Private landowners
- Tribal entities including Native American tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, and Native Hawaiian organizations
- State, county, and local governments
- National and local non-government organizations, such as the National Wild Turkey Federation, the Nature Conservancy, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and Trout Unlimited
- Commercial entities, such as environmental consultants and forestry industry

⁴ Charnley et al., "Fostering collective action to reduce wildfire risk across property boundaries in the American West." Environ. Res. Ltr. 15 025007 (2020).

Project Selection Process

Joint Chiefs projects are solicited annually from Forest Service and NRCS units. Proposals are evaluated by interdisciplinary staff from the national offices of both agencies and prioritized for joint selection by the Chiefs of both agencies.

For the FY 2023 selection process, a solicitation package was released on May 25, 2022, and new project proposals were due August 5, 2022. The Joint Chiefs program received 19 proposals, which were evaluated by a joint NRCS and Forest Service review panel. The panel also developed an evaluation process, incorporating evaluation criteria described in Section 40808(d) in the BIL as well as USDA priorities. For FY 2023, 14 newly selected Joint Chiefs projects were announced on February 21, 2023⁵.

Each year, proposals are evaluated based on whether the proposal:

- Includes clear descriptions of project goals and objectives.
- Reduces wildfire risk in a municipal watershed, wildland-urban interface (WUI), or in high-priority firesheds.
- Was developed through a collaborative process with participation from diverse stakeholders.
- Advances equity for underserved communities and landowners.
- Leverages existing authorities and non-Federal funding.
- Includes a high probability of success.
- Supports established State and regional priorities.
- Increases forest workforce capacity or forest business infrastructure and development.
- Provides measurable outcomes.

Program Outreach

Every year the national Joint Chiefs program managers coordinate outreach for proposal solicitation. This includes informational webinars, question and answer sessions, and internal agency education sessions. Starting in FY 2021, outreach efforts were expanded to include additional webinar sessions, public press releases for proposal solicitations, and an organized session at the 2021 National Convention of the Society of American Foresters.

Individual project managers and partners also conduct outreach to landowners and other stakeholders. Projects generate increased communication through articles, story maps, websites, and videos to highlight successes. These communications products are a key method for conducting Joint Chiefs outreach and another example of the benefits of collaboration.

The public notice for the FY 2023 Joint Chiefs program solicitation and additional public webinars generated increased engagement with members of the public, including more than double the viewership numbers on Joint Chiefs webinars compared to previous years. The public expressed interest in learning how to develop projects with NRCS and the Forest Service. Specific interests ranged from projects that included state and local public lands, to Tribal lands, to building a collaboration of diverse

⁵ See FY 2023 new project announcement press release: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/news/usda-invests-more-than-486-million-to-manage-risks-combat-climate-change>

partners. Going forward, increased public interest and engagement is anticipated with the Joint Chiefs program, and outreach will continue to expand accordingly.

Equity

In the Forest Service and NRCS, Joint Chiefs is a covered program under the Justice 40 initiative⁶. Accordingly, starting in FY 2023 the proposal solicitation and evaluation processes incorporated equity and environmental justice considerations. The evaluation criteria included a review of the equity engagement in the design and implementation of the proposal, as well as benefits to historically disadvantaged and underserved communities. Historically, most Joint Chiefs projects have occurred in or near remote rural communities, and have provided benefits to rural landscapes and economies, including disadvantaged communities.

Overall project benefits have ranged from providing forest workforce jobs, protecting homes and water supplies, providing wood products to local communities, increasing opportunities for outdoor recreation, and developing infrastructure and capacity in local forestry industries. Refinements to the program to better focus on equity and underserved communities are anticipated to continue with increased engagement and through the proposal selection process.

In addition to refinements to the proposal solicitation and evaluation process, the annual reporting process now includes Justice 40 and equity components since FY 2022. Projects report benefits to communities, including jobs created and sustained in underserved communities, as well as work with underserved and first-time landowners. Additionally, the annual reporting process now includes acres treated on Tribal lands. Since inclusion of this metric in FY 2022, more than 1,400 acres of fire risk reduction has been completed on Tribal lands. In addition, 26 projects have closely partnered with Tribes to complete cross boundary forest restoration work since 2014.

⁶ The Justice40 Initiative is an environmental justice goal that 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain Federal investments flow to disadvantaged communities. A “covered program” is a Federal Government program that includes investments that can benefit disadvantaged communities.

Section 40808 (g)(1) Recommendations to Congress

Support of the Program

- Both NRCS and Forest Service appreciate the ongoing Congressional support to the Joint Chiefs program. It is recommended that Congress continue to support Joint Chiefs and the beneficial impacts the program has on communities and forest landscapes across the country.

Appendix A: Treatments Interacting with Wildfire

The following is a small sample of recent fire risk reduction successes from 2019 through 2022.

State	Year Project Initiated	Joint Chiefs Project Name	National Forest	Total Forest Service funding	Total NRCS funding	Treatments interacted with wildfire
OR	2016	Greater La Pine Basin Cohesive Strategy	Deschutes	\$4,807,552	\$258,246	Treatments helped suppress the 2020 Rosland Road fire, protecting the community of Newberry Estates, OR.
CA	2019	Rural Community Fire Protection and Forest Management	Shasta-Trinity and Six Rivers	\$2,589,950	\$238,249	Treatments helped suppress the 2020 August Complex fire, protecting the community of Ruth lake, CA. Treatments also helped suppress the 2021 Monument Fire.
OR	2019	Elk Creek Watershed Restoration Partnership	Umpqua	\$1,530,619	\$1,694,521	Treatments helped suppress the 2021 Devil's Knob Complex fire.
CA	2019	Central Sierra Recovery and Restoration	Sierra	\$485,832	\$2,337,992	Treatments helped suppress the 2019 Ferguson Fire, protecting four communities in rural California. Treatments also helped suppress the 2020 Creek Fire, helping to save three additional communities.
CA	2019	Yreka Craggy	Klamath	\$171,920	\$582,440	Treatments helped suppress numerous lightning start fires from 2019 through 2021. Treatments helped suppress the 2022 McKinney fire.
CO	2019	Northern Front Range Collaboration Watershed Resilience	Arapaho-Roosevelt	\$6,485,533	\$5,440,980	Treatments helped suppress the 2020 Cameron Peak fire, protecting the community of Glacier View, CO.
ID	2020	Goose Creek Interagency Sage Grouse Habitat Restoration Project	Sawtooth	\$1,182,266	\$170,563	Treatments helped suppress the 2020 Badger fire.
CA	2020	Little Jones Creek Project Smith River Collaborative	Six Rivers	\$747,931	\$339,300	Treatments helped suppress the 2021 Slater fire.
NM	2020	Greater Santa Fe Fireshed	Santa Fe	\$365,334	\$1,011,312	Treatments helped suppress the 2020 Medio fire. Treatments also helped suppress two fires in 2021: the 376 fire and Llano Loco fire.
AR, OK	2020	Building Resilient Watersheds to Improve Drinking Water	Ozark St. Francis/Ouachita	\$3,057,710	\$6,000,000	Treatments helped manage and suppress at least 19 fires between 2021 and 2022.
NE	2020	Nebraska Northwest Landscape Restoration Phase 2	Nebraska	\$1,867,052	\$1,186,215	Treatments helped suppress two fires in 2020: the Deer Camp fire and Dismal fire. Treatments helped suppress numerous fires in 2022, including the Whitetail fire and the 201 fire.
MO	2020	Central Ozark Glade, Woodland, and Native Diversity Restoration Project	Mark Twain	\$1,381,010	\$1,047,000	Treatments helped suppress more than 46 fires between 2020 to 2022.
OR	2021	Lake County All Lands Restoration Initiative	Fremont-Winema	\$3,618,943	\$3,038,790	Treatments on private land helped suppress the 2021 Patton Meadow fire.