



Forest Service Urban Connections Report

The Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2022 (House Report 117-83) included the following directive:

Urban Connections—The Committee continues to strongly support the Forest Service Urban Connections Program as a model for building strong relationships with diverse youth, interested citizens, urban leaders, interagency partners, and non-governmental organizations. The Committee provides not less than the enacted level for this program. Further, the Committee directs the Service to report back within 90 days of the enactment of this Act, on a strategy to expand the program nationwide and the budgetary requirements necessary, assuming matching support from the private sector.

Summary

The Urban Connections program was started in 2001 in the Eastern Region to reach out to urban communities and build alliances that complement the Forest Service's mission. At the time, it was recognized that while much of the Region's population lived in urban areas, urban stakeholders had little awareness of or opportunity to be involved with management of their national forests. The program is unique to the Eastern Region of the Forest Service, though other Regions have other programs and ways of interacting with urban populations. The Urban Connections program stands out for its focus on working with local organizations, leaders, and community members to develop programming that meets their needs, as well as facilitating connections among partners and across different units and branches of the agency.

Currently, the program has a strong focus on working with partners to engage diverse and underserved communities, providing meaningful nature-based educational programming and experiences that connect urban residents to the green space around them and their National Forests. The program directly supports the Forest Service mission and values by working to ensure more people understand the importance of sustaining forests and the benefits they provide, and that the benefits, outcomes, and opportunities to participate are made available to all, especially in urban places and with populations that have historically been marginalized or overlooked.

Expanding the Urban Connections Program to other regions of the Forest Service would provide an opportunity for other urban areas across the country to better connect with the agency, as well as benefit from those connections in ways that can help them meet their community wellbeing goals. Expansion can help the Forest Service take a more forward-thinking and integrated approach to meeting its sustainability mission, while doing so in an equity-centered way. However, expansion should be done with an acknowledgement of the trade-offs it would require under a flat budget environment.

Current State of Program

The Urban Connections program is under the National Forest System branch of the agency. It is based out of the Eastern Region's Public & Government Relations Staff. The program currently has Urban Connections City Coordinators in Detroit, Boston, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and St. Louis. We also have ongoing partnerships in Milwaukee and Chicago, as well as some other areas, but no dedicated City Coordinators.

The City Coordinator is responsible for building long-term relationships with urban stakeholders and working with local and state partners to foster connections between people and the outdoors, from

recreation experiences to natural resources career opportunities. Work is largely done through formal partnership agreements with organizations that have common goals and complementary missions. The projects and partnerships in a city are guided by a steering team and core team, typically made up of leaders and staff from nearby national forests, as well as the State Private and Tribal Forestry and Research & Development branches of the Forest Service.

The program uses the following strategic approaches:

1. **Leveraging Synergy and Independence:** Urban outreach is a shared effort across the branches of the Forest Service. Opportunities for collaboration include projects that allow us to deliver services more efficiently and effectively to urban stakeholders by working together. However, each branch may carry out specific program responsibilities independently.
2. **Emphasizing Networking and Building on Existing Programs:** Urban outreach achieves results primarily by working in a networking capacity and building on existing programs.
3. **Reaching Out to Community Activists and Opinion Leaders:** Working with community activists and opinion leaders is key to achieving results. Given their roles in the communities we are trying to connect with, they can help us gain an understanding their needs first, and then with building relationships.
4. **Focusing on Key Cities:** Key cities are identified based on the potential to have a meaningful impact with our presence. The number of key cities depends on the resources available for long term urban outreach.
5. **Adapting to Local Situations:** Although some approaches and strategies are consistent across cities, specific outreach activities will be tailored to best fit the needs of each city.
6. **Using Common Messages:** When appropriate, outreach efforts involve common messages across the branches of the Forest Service and key cities to support the concept of one Forest Service, to enhance the saturation of messages, and to allow for efficiencies in producing outreach materials.
7. **Reinforcing Communications:** Primary efforts at building relationships with community leaders and activists is reinforced through media outreach, placing information in public areas, through social media, and other channels for sharing information.

Critical elements of success for the program include:

1. Having Urban Connections coordinators located in the metropolitan areas where they work.
2. Taking the time to understand the communities and their needs.
3. Taking the time to build meaningful, trusted relationships.
4. Providing relevant, accurate information that resonates with our implementation partners.
5. Facilitating connections across local, state, and national organizations.
6. Working together across units and branches of the Forest Service so we exemplify being a reputable, knowledgeable, and helpful agency.
7. Coordinating with Grants & Agreements staff to ensure that understand the program and can help support City Coordinators in developing and managing agreements successfully.

The table below summarizes Urban Connections funding over the past several years, as well as the number of projects. Annual program participation data are currently not comparable across the years due to inconsistency in how participation was counted. In fiscal years 2021 and 2022, the agency invested additional funding into the program as requested by Congress. A similar amount is planned for Fiscal Year 2023.

Fiscal Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of Projects	21	24	25	17	16	8	28	44	TBD
Forest Service Funding ¹	\$169,687	\$317,624	\$406,393	\$359,970	\$166,826	\$109,206	\$2M	\$2M	\$2.5M
Partner Match	\$430,518	\$608,628	\$987,438	\$540,734	\$586,425	\$237,584	\$1.6M	\$1.4M	TBD

The Eastern Region is committed to expanding the Urban Connections Program within the region as funding and staffing allows. This region recently added St. Louis to the Program where the focus has been on understanding the partnership landscape and connecting with organizations to understand their needs, including schools and faith-based organizations. In fiscal year 2023, we are working on adding a new city to the program, most likely Newark, New Jersey. Given the large metropolitan areas along the Eastern Seaboard, along with large underserved and underrepresented populations in those urban areas, we believe the Forest Service can have a substantial impact connecting people in these communities to nature, the outdoors, and their public lands, starting with a presence in Newark.

Having City Coordinators has been key to the success of the Urban Connections program. However, given that our City Coordinators only have the capacity to manage a certain number of partnerships, along with the fact that we can't be in all cities, we have been able to use the additional funding from the past couple years to expand the program in new ways. This includes funding projects and partnerships led by the national forests that meet the objectives of the Urban Connections program, giving them opportunities to be engaged directly with urban areas and underserved populations outside of our four core Urban Connections cities. It also includes working on projects and partnerships with State & Private Forestry and the Northern Research Station, again allowing us to work in additional cities throughout the Region to connect people in urban areas with nature and the Forest Service. For example, we are supporting a project managed by the Northern Research Station in collaboration with Temple University, the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and multiple local partners to develop a program that gives physicians and families tools to improve the health and wellness of Philadelphia children by helping them locate and use safe, accessible and convenient public green space and increase their nature experiences. Leveraging Forest Service assets throughout the Region has been an invaluable part of our regional expansion strategy. Finally, we have had the opportunity to work with several organizations that are able to work at larger geographic scales, which has helped us grow our programs by having one partner that is able to support programming across multiple cities, while working with local groups and expanding our network and impact. Examples include Wilderness Inquiry, Outdoor Afro, Leave No Trace, and the Bus for Outdoor Access and Teaching.

National Expansion and Agency Goals

The Forest Service's mission *to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations* continues to be timeless, as sustainability of these lands is essential to the well-being of our society. The Forest Service wants to continue to be responsive to the societal changes that naturally happen over time due to demographic shifts and other

¹ Does not include Forest Service salaries.

factors, so that we can continue to provide the highest public value, including sustainably managed forests and grasslands. This requires interacting with and providing benefits to all sectors of society and making sure we are actively connecting with segments of society that have historically been underrepresented or left out.

Given the goals of the Urban Connections Program, expanding the program outside of the Eastern Region would play an important role in achieving these agency objectives, which are presented in the Forest Service Equity Action Plan in support of Executive Order 13985, Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. Over four-fifths of the United States' population lives in urban areas, and that percentage continues to increase. To ensure people in urban areas understand the benefits and importance of sustaining national forests and other public lands, we need to have a presence in these areas to help facilitate those connections. These goals are also reflected through the agency's Reimagine Recreation efforts, which focus on ensuring everyone feels welcome and connected to the outdoors and that we offer the type of recreation experiences that our diverse public is looking for. Many of the partnerships under the Urban Connections Program focus on providing youth with positive outdoor recreation experiences as a first step in their relationship with nature, greenspace, and the outdoors.

In addition to the Urban Connections Program, a considerable amount of work in urban areas and on urban issues is being done across the country through two different Deputy Areas of the agency. In State & Private Forestry, the Urban and Community Forestry Program delivers nature-based solutions to ensure a resilient and equitable tree canopy in urban communities. In Research & Development, the Urban Field Stations network represents the premiere urban and residential landscape-focused natural resource science management network in the United States. Expanding the National Forest System's Urban Connections program beyond the Eastern Region can augment and bring additional synergy to that ongoing work. It can be a catalyst to highlight and bring attention to all the ways that the Forest Service shows up in urban areas. For example, Urban Connections City Coordinators can play an important role connecting their network of partners to funding opportunities under the Urban and Community Forestry Program provided in the Inflation Reduction Act.

National Expansion Strategy

Based on what we have learned from our current Urban Connections Program, several factors are important to consider in developing an expansion strategy and determining city locations. Some initial considerations we have identified include:

- Existing partnership landscape, networks, and collaboration.
- State and local support.
- Opportunities to reach undeserved and underrepresented populations.
- Level of access to safe green spaces.
- Health and well-being levels and other indicators of community need.
- Proximity/opportunity to connect with national forests.
- Leadership interest and support at local Forest Service units.

Because expansion of the program requires a thoughtful approach that takes into consideration the above and additional factors, we have developed a two-part approach to short-term program expansion as described below.

Short-term Expansion

In fiscal year 2023, the focus of our program expansion will be engagement with leadership across the other agency regions and stations to assess their current work and partnerships in urban communities and identification of locations for new Urban Connections cities near the existing Eastern Region program.

Our two-part approach to identifying new Urban Connection cities includes:

- 1) Working with existing Urban Connections partners who have a geographic scope beyond the Eastern Region to incorporate some engagements/programs in cities and with national forests in other regions and include these elements into our partnership agreements.
- 2) Engaging a couple of relatively close National Forest System units in the Southern Region on development of partnerships and programs in St. Louis.

Engagement and assessment across other regions will require dedicated time of existing staff, with the goal of providing recommendations and needs to the national office for establishment of their programs by the end of fiscal year 2023 or early 2024. The fiscal year 2023 level of funding for the Urban Connections Program will continue to support the growth in the program within the Eastern Region, along with the development of an updated strategic plan and possibly limited expansion into other cities as described above. These efforts will inform future discussions, feasibility determinations, and funding needs for broader long-term expansion of the program.