

How Oregon is Implementing the Community Wildfire Defense Grant

By Jessica Prakke

Over the last decade, the Oregon landscape and climate has changed, leading to more aggressive wildfires and longer fire seasons. Oregon currently spends approximately five months in fire season every year, with an increasing number of communities throughout the state dealing with wildfire.



A new federal grant is now available to help mitigate the impacts of wildfires on communities. The Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) is a result of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, or IIJA (2021). The U.S. Forest Service and states will score submitted grant applications and distribute funding to awarded recipients. Grant funds can be used to:

1. Develop/revise Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP), and/or
2. Implement mitigation activities identified within an existing CWPP.

Over the next five years the Oregon Department of Forestry is providing technical support to Oregon communities, agencies, and all eligible applicants that wish to apply for funds through the CWDG. The Oregon Department of Forestry is also providing technical assistance to the U.S. Forest Service by receiving the applications and then the U.S. Forest Service will distribute funding once the scoring process is complete.

With the implementation of this new program comes the creation of a new position. The Community Wildfire Defense Grant Program (CWDG) coordinator is funded through the IIJA funding and provides technical support to all applicants. The purpose of this position is to coordinate the CWDG efforts on a statewide basis. This position will lead the development and implementation of technical support for CWDG policy, community fire planning, grant planning, application, and implementation for selected wildfire protection grant programs for all grantees.

This new grant program, alongside the

increased investments in wildfire preparedness and mitigation from Oregon's 2021 legislative session, help sets Oregon communities up for success in becoming more fire resilient. These investments include:

- Senate Bill 762 helps Oregon modernize and improve wildfire preparedness through three key strategies: creating fire-adapted communities, developing safe and effective response, and increasing the resiliency of Oregon's landscapes. While portions of the bill increased capacity for wildfire response, other portions funded grant programs to increase landscape resiliency at both a community and landscape scale.

- One program, the Small Forestland Grant Program awarded \$5 million to small forestland owners to reduce hazardous fuels on their property. A portion of the grants totaling \$800,000 was awarded to 20 Firewise communities to fund a variety of fuels treatments. In total, the \$5 million investment plans to treat a total of over 6,300 acres for homeowners and small forestland owners.

Community and forester involvement

Unlike earlier grants that invested in wildfire mitigation at the landscape level

or through piecemeal efforts, a CWPP helps communities work together to achieve common goals and deal with controversial issues related to wildfire. Throughout the process of developing or updating a CWPP, there are opportunities for community participation, such as collecting information about fire risk, engaging in planning and outreach meetings, and sharing information to increase public awareness and education.

Any community at risk from wildfire, including local governments, tribal communities, and state forestry agencies, is eligible to apply for the grant. The funds are prioritized for areas identified as having high wildfire hazard, low-income communities, or communities impacted by severe disaster in the last 10 years. Communities may not know it, but they most likely have expert foresters within their area who can assist in the CWPP implementation. The Society of American Foresters is comprised of retired and practicing foresters, both public and private, who can also benefit from CWDG funds.

These state investments coupled with CWDG projects will help in protecting communities across the state and prepare Oregon for fire seasons to come. *WF*

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