



RURAL URBAN FORESTRY

The focus of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds to disadvantaged communities brought more attention to the health, equity, and geographic components of urban and community forestry. It also highlighted the existing work that this program brings to the West: Rural Urban Forestry. It's tempting to give the acronym of RU ... because that is what it is. Small populations require staff to wear multiple hats in their communities, and capacity is stretched thin. In Montana, the services in rural communities deserve a nod for implementing projects with these new funds. The themes of their projects revolve around protection, sustainability, safety, health, and sovereignty.

Rural Urban Forestry may sound like an oxymoron, but this is a common role for Montana, as the fourth-largest state by area and the third-least densely populated state. The biggest factors affecting Montana's disadvantaged communities include environmental issues, economic disparities, and public health. Additionally, communities span far apart, creating challenges in access to commodities and resources.

In the spring of 2023, Montana received \$750,000 in funds from IRA. The Urban & Community Forestry (UCF) program released the first round of IRA funds in December 2023. While \$300,000 was available, applicants requested over \$700,000 in project funds. Projects started to get off the ground in the summer of 2024, and the energy has continued to grow.

Small, rural communities developed project proposals to establish food systems, shelter, canopy, and much-needed maintenance for an aging tree population. These projects represent the needs of underserved populations who live in these areas. For example, the Harnessing Hope Foundation will

bring a multifunctional windbreak to the tribal communities in Fort Belknap Reservation. This concept involves using culturally appropriate trees that can provide both shelter from environmental elements and produce a food source for the local residents.

Montana Urban and Community Forestry Association received funds to aid small, disadvantaged towns across the state. Their goals include assisting in inventories and management plans for disadvantaged communities, promoting tree boards, and assisting public works employees. They also encourage the profession of UCF tailored to Montana's urban forestry challenges and opportunities; share technology tools and resources relevant for rural communities; incorporate biodiversity, health, resiliency, and climate change impacts into trainings and outreach. This targeted approach to underserved rural residents will promote resilient and healthy community forests.

Designing projects tailored to rural areas is an important aspect of UCF in Montana. In order to best serve our communities, we must understand the

population, the culture, local conditions, and the changing climate. The success itself lies within ensuring the next generation can enjoy the benefits that come from trees and building the foundation to support these efforts.



Header Left: Fort Benton, a small town in central MT with a rich history, features a walking path with legacy cottonwoods and aging ash trees along the Missouri River. Photo: Jamie Kirby, DNRC. **Header Right:** Staff at Blackfeet Community College start a row of shelterbelt trees in the highline tribal community of Browning, MT. Photo: Jamie Kirby, DNRC. **Above:** Tribal Senator Harold Male Bear and the Wyola Mighty Few Youth members worked with DNRC to bring trees to their community, including trees for shade, protection, and fruit-producing trees for food sovereignty. Photo: Josh Smith, DNRC