



## Leveraging U.S. Agriculture and Forests for Near-Term Stimulus and Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a profoundly detrimental impact on the American people and the U.S. economy. As part of the national response to this pandemic, we expect the federal government will continue to enact stimulus and recovery measures in an effort to restart and rebuild the economy.

In designing these measures, near-term jobs and economic growth will understandably be prioritized, given the millions of American workers who have lost their jobs in recent months. But Congress also has an opportunity to advance, with broad bipartisan support, investments in agricultural soil conservation, tree planting, and forest health programs that achieve substantial economic and environmental co-benefits. Specifically, we urge Congress to include proven, implementation-ready programs that support the following goals:

- Modernize rural infrastructure and create new opportunities for both skilled and unskilled labor in local communities.
- Reinvigorate rural innovation and manufacturing.
- Position U.S. farmers, ranchers, and forest managers as leaders in innovative natural carbon removal and sequestration.

### Near-Term Policy Agenda for U.S. Farms and Forests

The Bipartisan Policy Center believes near-term stimulus policies must be designed to put resources to work quickly while leveraging existing laws, authorizations, and programs to maximize their impact. Our recent [blog](#) post explains this thinking in greater detail. BPC has identified several policy proposals that are uniquely positioned to advance both near- and long-term goals for helping Americans get back to work, supporting rural economic development, and enhancing the environmental and climate change-related contributions of U.S. farms and forests:

1. Expand **soil health** programs for farms and ranches.
2. Drive local job creation through **tree planting** programs on non-federal lands.
3. Address the **forest restoration and hazardous fuels** backlog on federal lands.
4. Further develop **rural broadband** infrastructure.
5. Promote diversified **wood products** markets and wood engineering innovation.
6. Augment federal **wildland firefighting** capabilities and preparedness.
7. Invest in **workforce development** through natural resources-based national service and job training programs.



## 1. Expand soil health programs for farmers and ranchers

U.S. agriculture has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 economic crisis and will likely need federal support to recover. Expanding soil health programs that encourage practices such as cover crops, crop rotations, and conservation tillage can increase farm productivity and profitability. While the transition to using these practices is not without financial risk, farmers benefit from increased soil carbon in a variety of ways including mitigated impacts from weather events, reduced input costs, improved forage for livestock, and increased annual yields. Multiple Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs run through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency can provide farmers with the financial and technical resources to improve net income and generate new jobs in the agriculture sector.

**BPC recommends the following program-specific measures:**

- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) – Increase the level of authorized mandatory spending by \$800 million per year over four years, with new spending directed to conservation practices that store carbon in soils. NRCS cost-share contracts with landowners should be established for a minimum of three years.**
- **Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) – Increase funding for CIG soil health demonstration trials to \$100 million per year for the next four years.**

These recommendations are relatively easy to implement as the programmatic infrastructure for expanding NRCS programs already exists and landowners are familiar with the programs (the programs were reauthorized in the last Farm Bill with broad bipartisan support). Additional funding would incentivize soil management practices that boost agricultural productivity for farmers and provide long-term economic benefits to rural America.

## 2. Drive local job creation through forestry programs on non-federal lands

Tree planting and forest management projects on private lands create new jobs in rural communities and have the additional benefit of utilizing both skilled and unskilled labor. Existing USDA conservation incentive programs for farmers, ranchers, and forest owners can be scaled up for practices including reforestation, agroforestry, ecological restoration, and forest restocking. These are well-established programs in the Farm Bill with existing programmatic infrastructure that will allow Congress to move funds quickly and effectively. Expanding these programs and ensuring their longevity over longer timeframes would help circumvent any potential issues with forest stand maintenance and mortality, ensuring a sustained positive impact on local economies, while also enabling local ecosystems to reap water, wildlife, and climate benefits.

**BPC recommends bolstering the following incentive programs for private landowners:**

- **EQIP – Increase EQIP funding by \$100 million per year over four years, with new funding directed towards agroforestry and forest management practices such as timber stand improvement, forest health treatments, restoration of natural fire regimes through prescribed fire, invasive species control, and other practices. NRCS cost-share contracts with landowners should be established for a minimum of four years.**



- **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) – Expand the acreage cap from 27.5 million to 32 million acres. Direct the administration to offer another general sign-up in 2020 with enhanced incentive payments. Increase funding by \$800 million per year to encourage farmer participation. In addition to raising the CRP acreage cap, expand practice incentives payments for reforestation projects on historically forested lands through the CRP. Focus CRP tree planting on important forest types such as longleaf pine, bottomland hardwoods, riparian forested buffers, and other forest types that provide significant ecological and water quality benefits. Also, amend the CRP to allow for reforestation on marginal pasture lands that were formerly forested. Restoring trees to marginal lands creates rural employment opportunities and provides benefits for soil health, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration.**
- **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program Wetlands Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE) – Increase funding for ACEP-WRE to \$100 million per year over four years to protect and restore forested wetlands, including hydrological restoration and tree planting. Expanding this program would provide significant job opportunities and water quality benefits.**
- **U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Urban and Community Forestry – Provide additional funding of \$100 million per year over four years for the existing grants programs of the USFS Urban and Community Forestry Program to improve community resilience and contribute to regional economies.**

### **3. Address the forest management and reforestation backlog on federal lands**

On federal lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Department of the Interior, increasing the pace of reforestation and investing in active forest management can create thousands of outdoor jobs, putting people back to work in an environment that is conducive to social distancing.

Active forest management focuses on labor-intensive techniques such as hazardous fuels reduction, reforestation, stream restoration, road decommissioning, replacing and improving culverts, forest thinning and harvesting, and prescribed fire as means of accomplishing needed restoration work. These techniques are critically needed to build forest health and resilience to threats such as wildfire, climate change, bark beetle infestations, etc. Active management practices can be focused on areas that are in need of ecological restoration and that are near the wildland–urban interface, where these practices can help reduce the threat of wildfire to people and property. Benefits would include generating positive economic impacts for rural communities, enhancing the health of forest ecosystems, and reducing the probability of catastrophic wildfires.

**BPC recommends the following program-specific measures:**

- **Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) – Provide an additional \$35 to \$50 million per year in funding for the CFLRP over four years. This program was included in the 2018 Farm Bill with bipartisan support. It provides grants that cover up to 50% of the cost of carrying out and monitoring restoration treatments on**



**national forests. Many projects under the CFLRP have gone through National Environmental Policy Act review and could be initiated quickly with additional funding. Shovel-readiness is a critical metric when determining which recovery activities to prioritize in an economic crisis.**

- **Department of the Interior hazardous fuels reduction programs – Provide additional funding for Interior Department hazardous fuels reduction programs on public lands managed by the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Indian Affairs.**
- **Reforestation Trust Fund (RTF) – BPC recommends lifting the cap on the RTF to \$60 million per year and funding the USFS at that full amount to implement reforestation projects in National Forests. The RTF, which was established in 1980 to reforest public lands impacted by wildfire, pests, disease or timber harvests, is funded by existing tariffs imposed on imported timber and wood products. Lifting the cap would not raise tariffs.**

#### **4. Further develop rural broadband infrastructure**

Investing in modern and robust rural infrastructure will support agricultural and forestry innovation, broaden rural manufacturing opportunities, and enable the scale up of soil and forest carbon sequestration efforts. Of the 24 million American households that do not have reliable, affordable high-speed internet, 80% are in rural and tribal communities.<sup>1</sup> Broadband access allows for increased health, educational, and economic opportunities, and supports job and business creation and growth. Broadband infrastructure also supports precision agriculture and forestry technologies and practices, which can facilitate data collection and improved management of soils and forests. Rural broadband could also improve energy efficiency and electric grid modernization efforts in rural areas, especially as many rural electric cooperatives seek to deploy smart grid technology.

The USDA Rural Utilities Service's Telecommunications Programs are dedicated to incentivizing rural broadband buildout using grants, loans, and loan guarantees that are provided through the Rural Development Broadband ReConnect Program, the Rural Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee Program, and the Community Connect Grant Program. The ReConnect program was established in the 2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act. It currently allocates up to \$200 million for grants, up to \$200 million for 50/50 grant/loan combinations, and up to \$200 million for low-interest loans. The program attracted significant interest in the first round of funding; USDA received 146 applications requesting \$1.4 billion in funding across all three funding products. The Rural Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee Program was authorized in the Rural Electrification Act of 1936; appropriations for this program totaled \$5.83 million for fiscal year 2020. These funds can be used to construct or purchase facilities and equipment needed to provide telecommunications service in rural areas. The Community Connect Grant Program was codified in the 2018 Farm Bill; appropriations for this program totaled \$50 million for fiscal years 2018 through 2023. These funds support the deployment of broadband to rural areas where it is not economical for private-sector companies to invest in new projects.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.usda.gov/broadband>



The Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs has established a new National Tribal Broadband Grant program to fund feasibility studies for the deployment or expansion of broadband services in tribal communities. This first funding round in fiscal year 2020 provided 25 to 30 grants ranging from \$40,000 to \$50,000. The Bureau of Indian Affairs has authority for discretionary grantmaking to federally recognized tribes, including to support broadband deployment or expansion, under the Snyder Act of 1924 and the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020.

**BPC recommends that Congress increase funding for the USDA Rural Utilities Service's ReConnect program, the Rural Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee Program, and the Community Connect Grant Program. The 2018 Farm Bill, which included multiple provisions for these broadband programs, passed with bipartisan support.**

**To support broadband deployment planning in unserved and underserved tribal communities, BPC also recommends that Congress increase funding for the Interior Department's National Tribal Broadband Grant Program.**

## 5. Promote diversified wood products markets and wood engineering innovation

Additional funding for the USFS Wood Innovation Grant Program would help diversify rural economies by fostering opportunities for innovative wood products, such as cross-laminated timber. These grants promote the use of wood in commercial building construction and broaden wood products markets. Wood technology innovation has strong bipartisan support, as evidenced by the inclusion of the Timber Innovation Act in the 2018 Farm Bill. In 2019, the USFS awarded over \$8.9 million through the Wood Innovations Grant Program.

**To bolster wood markets, BPC recommends federal funding of \$40 million over four years for the Community Wood Energy and Wood Innovation Program and \$20 million over four years for the Rural Revitalization Technologies programs.**

## 6. Augment federal wildland firefighting capabilities and preparedness

Deploying firefighters while mitigating against coronavirus will be a major challenge during the 2020 wildfire season. Recently, 10% of firefighters in San Jose, California had COVID-19 or were under quarantine.<sup>2</sup> Federal agencies with wildland firefighting responsibilities will need additional resources to hire more wildland fire personnel, for COVID-19 testing for firefighters while deployed, and for technology and other modifications for fire camps to reduce crowding, and aviation and other equipment that will be essential with fewer firefighters. Funding should go through USDA to the USFS fire program and through DOI for the fire programs of the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Indian Affairs.

**BPC recommends increased funding for USDA and the Interior Department to fund immediate personnel and fire preparedness needs for the 2020 wildfire season. In 2018, Congress passed legislation authorizing emergency funding for USFS fire suppression costs.**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/20/climate/coronavirus-firefighters-wildfires.html>



**At least a portion of the increased expenditures that the agency will be forced to make this summer as a result of COVID-19 could be covered by emergency funding. But, it is highly likely that the agency will require additional funding this fiscal year to cover the entirety of the additional expenses required.**

Notably, wildland firefighting provides significant job opportunities for rural Americans, including tribal members. Further, responding to and managing wildfires reduces threats to peoples' lives, homes, and property. It also helps avoid or reduce the severity of wildfires, which protects forests and avoids or reduces the amount of carbon and other air pollutants released into the atmosphere from wildfires.

## **7. Invest in workforce development through national service and job training programs**

Increased funding for existing natural resources-related national service and job training programs through the Department of Labor supports development of the young adult workforce and creates new paths to economic opportunity, particularly in rural America. DOL programs include the Job Corps Civilian Conservation Center Wildland Fire Program and the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps.

Increased investment in the Job Corps Civilian Conservation Center Wildland Fire Program can help prepare a wildland firefighting workforce to mitigate the threat of wildfires. At any given time, the program can dispatch over 1,000 qualified Job Corps firefighters nationwide. Established in 1964, the Jobs Corps program has a history of bipartisan support, as evidenced most recently in bipartisan support for the Jobs Corps Protection Act, which was proposed in 2019 to prevent the closure of Forest Service Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers. The Jobs Corps program is specifically targeted to disadvantaged youths, a group who may be heavily impacted by the economic shutdown.

The AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) provides training and employs young adults ages 18-24 to suppress and contain wildfires. AmeriCorps members are shared among various agencies and non-profits that utilize prescribed fire, including the USFS, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state forestry agencies, the Nature Conservancy, and other non-profits such as the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests. The AmeriCorps firefighter training program provides a ready pool of available firefighters that boosts the nation's wildfire-fighting capacity. The NCCC program also includes other environmental stewardship activities such as planting native species and restoring hiking trails on public lands.

**BPC recommends additional funding for the USFS Jobs Corps Civilian Center Wildland Fire Program and the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps to (1) increase the number of certified wildland firefighters and (2) increase the number of trained workers available for completing necessary conservation and resource management projects on public lands and in communities across the country.**