

Key Issue #14: Fostering Federal Agency Collaboration and Program Improvement

Many thought leaders suggested that urban forestry may reach its potential only when federal agencies are able to collaborate across silos, to leverage their different programs and sources of funding, and to ensure that policies across programs are aligned and streamlined for maximum effectiveness. Since urban forestry was recognized by the federal government as an important program 20 years ago, the role of urban forestry has evolved and grown dramatically. Now, for example, community forests are seen as a cost-effective long-term solution for numerous human and environmental ills – producing cleaner air, cleaner water, reduced stormwater, and a healthier psycho-social environment. Urban forestry is now a central solution to central community problems. But urban forestry isn't fully utilized as a cost-effective solution, and opportunities are lost, because of its programmatic conceptualization 20 years ago. To address this structural weakness, thought leaders suggested several possible strategies. First, federal agencies should be brought together to identify ways that overlapping program goals and funding can be leveraged – e.g. for cleaner air, cleaner water, healthier communities. Additionally, thought leaders noted that the UCF program needs to receive a higher amount of federal funding, and the need for more opportunities for direct involvement and connection with urban communities and the program (for example, many noted that traditional rural-focused forestry models of management are still being utilized by some USFS foresters, and new programming is needed to directly connect foresters with the opportunities and needs in urban communities, which frequently differ from those in rural communities). Finally, there is a need for more oversight of state programs to determine if the needs of urban communities are being addressed (for example, for state foresters to provide information about key UCF tools, resources, and highlights in current research to urban communities and NGOs).

IDEAS FOR ACTION - Gaps, Needs, Opportunities

- Foster increased opportunities for dialogue in the field such as the Vibrant Cities Task Force to bring together people from different fields. NUCFAC is in a perfect position to foster more of this dialogue and collaboration within the field.
- Consider the best placement for urban and community forestry in the USDA Forest Service (USFS) – perhaps moving it to a more central, integrated location within the USFS or to consider partnerships with other federal agencies.
 - Consider moving the UCF program to another federal agency or maybe to a Department Level to elevate its importance and effectiveness at the Federal level – possibly collaborating with other land management organizations such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or to a higher level within the USFS.
- Increase the importance of the USFS UCF program within the agency to a Deputy-level program; one option would be to bundle all programming related to urban natural resources management at a Deputy Chief level called Urban Natural Resource Stewardship, and this Deputy Chief would report directly to the USFS Chief.

- Improve communication between federal agencies, the community of practice and the lay audience. See Key Issues 3 and 7 for specific ideas for action.
- Provide cultural sensitivity training opportunities for USFS staff members to continue to be aware of and responsive to urban contexts which have a very different set of issues than rural issues (such as ways to effectively work in inner city neighborhoods, engaging underserved communities, and partnering with nonprofit organizations and community groups).
- Develop opportunities within federal agencies for cross-sector engagement to reach different audiences, not just the “usual tree suspects” but ways to “get outside the urban forester identity silo.” Greater federal inter-agency collaboration and communication are needed, as well as a need for federal agencies to reach out and connect with nonprofit organizations and the grassroots level.