



## Legislative & Policy Update – February 2024

Published February 28, 2024

The [Council of Western State Foresters](#) (CWSF) Legislative & Policy Update provides information on issues of importance to CWSF. Policy and legislative updates are found on the CWSF webpage [here](#). Please note that the items highlighted in these updates are only a selection of the issues CWSF and the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition (WFLC) are monitoring. Keep an eye out for our monthly newsletter that will provide summaries on other key legislative and programmatic issues. If you have not yet subscribed, you can do so [here](#). For more information, please contact [Neil Simpson](#), Director of Policy.

This month's policy update highlights:

- Funding opportunities for local governments to acquire slip-on tankers and tribal entities to access emerging markets.
- Extension to the National Urban and Community Forestry Cost Share Grant Program application deadline.
- Reforms to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Post-Disaster Assistance Policies.
- A bill introduced to create a new Emergency Forest Watershed Program to streamline post-fire recovery efforts.
- The ongoing fiscal year 2024 appropriations process.

### Slip-On Tanker Funding Opportunity for Local Governments

On February 6, 2024, the U.S. Department of Interior launched a pilot program to provide funding for local governments to purchase slip-on tanker units for trucks and other vehicles. Local governments that service areas with populations less than 25,000 people are eligible to apply for grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$200,000. Additional information can be found by viewing the [Slip-on Tanker Funding Opportunity](#) on grants.gov.

Applications must be submitted through grants.gov by March 21, 2024.

### Tribal Access to Emerging Markets Funding Opportunity

In a [press release](#) on February 14, 2024, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a \$20 million investment of Inflation Reduction Act funds to support federally recognized tribes and Alaska Native corporations and villages.

Funding will help recipients access emerging private markets for forest resilience, climate mitigation, water quality, carbon sequestration, and more. Eligible entities may submit one proposal for up to \$2 million. Additional information, including an informational webinar, can be found by viewing the [Grant Opportunity](#) on grants.gov.

Proposals must be submitted through grants.gov by August 21, 2024.

### **National Urban and Community Forestry Challenge Cost Share Grant Program Application Deadline Extended**

The 2024 National Urban and Community Forestry Challenge Cost Share Program grant application deadline has been extended to March 21, 2024, to allow applicants more time to finalize their collaboration teams and applications.

This year's focus is to conduct a national inventory and assessment of urban tree nurseries in collaboration with the USDA Forest Service's (Forest Service) Reforestation, Nursery, and Genetic Resources Unit (RNGR). The Notice of Funding Opportunity and additional information can be found on the [2024 National UCF Grant Application Website](#).

### **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Rule Changes to Reform Post-Disaster Assistance Policies**

FEMA has released an [Interim Final Rule](#) to amend its regulations governing the Individual Assistance program to simplify processes, remove barriers to entry, and increase eligibility for disaster survivors. According to the [press release](#), the new rule would:

- Replace the Critical Needs Assistance program with a cash relief program called Serious Needs Assistance, which would provide \$750 for households with serious needs to help cover expenses related to sheltering, evacuation, and meeting basic household needs.
- Create a new benefit called Displacement Assistance to provide eligible survivors upfront funds to assist with immediate housing needs.
- Remove the requirement for survivors to apply for a U.S. Small Business Administration loan before being considered for certain types of assistance.
- Streamline insurance related rules to assist with costs not reimbursed by insurance.
- Simplifies and provides more flexibility in the application and appeals process.

In addition to the interim final rule, FEMA has updated the [DisasterAssistance.gov](#) website to make applications easier and less time-consuming for survivors.

### **Watershed Protection and Forest Recovery Act of 2024**

Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO), along with co-sponsor Mitt Romney (R-UT), have introduced [S. 3760](#), the Watershed Protection and Forest Recovery Act of 2024. In the House of Representatives, Joe Neguse (D-CO) and four co-sponsors have introduced [H.R. 7294](#) under the same name.

The bills would:

- Create a dedicated funding source, the Emergency Forest Watershed Program, for the protection of downstream private property and water resources following natural disasters on National Forest System lands.
- Authorize watershed recovery protection measures following a natural disaster on National Forest System Land.

- Allow tribes, states, local governments, and water providers to enter into agreements with USFS to implement watershed recovery protection measures.
- Deem emergency protection measures carried under the program as emergency actions for purposes of NEPA compliance and require recovery projects to be completed within two years after the conclusion of a natural disaster.
- Provide liability protection for project sponsors.
- Waive matching requirements of project sponsors.

S. 3760 is currently in the Senate Agriculture Nutrition and Forestry Committee, and H.R. 7294 is in the House Agriculture Committee. A summary of the bill can be found [here](#). You can find information on the existing Natural Resources Conservation Service Emergency Watershed Protection Program by visiting their [webpage](#).

### Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations

As we wrap up the fifth month of the current federal fiscal year, appropriators are trying to finalize budgets before the third continuing resolution (CR) expires. Under the current CR, funding for certain congressional priority programs expires this Friday, March 1, while the Forest Service and other funding authorized by the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies (Interior) bill expires on March 8. The immediacy of the situation brought together President Biden, Vice President Harris, Senate Majority Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) (D-NY), Senate Minority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#) (R-KY), Speaker of the House [Mike Johnson](#) (R-LA) House Minority Leader [Hakeem Jeffries](#) (D-NY) on Tuesday to discuss funding the government, along with several other issues.

While the House Freedom Caucus [recently pushed](#) for a year-long CR and strong policy riders that would not pass the Democratic led Senate, leaders leaving the White House expressed optimism and a commitment to avoiding a shutdown. [Johnson told reporters](#), “We’re very optimistic,” he said. “We believe that we can get to agreement on these issues and prevent a government shutdown, that’s our first responsibility.”

As of February 28, the [latest reports](#) indicated agreement has been reached to avoid a government shutdown. Six appropriations bills, including the Interior bill, are planned to be voted on next week while the remaining funding bills will be included under a new CR with a deadline of March 22 while congressional leaders continue negotiations.

As agencies await final budgets from Congress, the Forest Service is preparing for budget shortages. In the February 8 publication of [From the Chief's Desk](#), Forest Service Chief Randy Moore states all signals point to lower appropriated funds in 2024. That, coupled with a 5.2% cost of living pay increase and rising operational costs, has resulted in a funding gap for salaries, IT needs, and other expenses. Moore calls for a “measured approach to ensure the sustainability of agency operations while maintaining a commitment to the well being of employees, forests, and the communities the Forest Service serves.”

We will continue to share updates regarding FY 2024 appropriations as information becomes available.