

WASHINGTON

Washington State Department of Natural Resources

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (WA DNR) Urban and Community Forestry (UCF) program was challenged by Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz to use tree canopy data to focus on social equity issues in Washington communities. The program used publicly available data to determine a connection between tree canopy and socio-economic issues. The report will help inform future investments in Washington communities.

Washington is experiencing accelerated canopy loss due to rapid urbanization and development across the state. At the 2017 annual meeting of the Washington Community Forestry Council, newly-elected Commissioner of Public Lands, Hilary Franz challenged UCF staff to determine if stormwater and socio-economic conditions in urban areas were closely aligned with tree canopy density. She requested a list of cities that are challenged by stormwater mitigation/regulation, have high numbers of ethnically diverse neighborhoods with low-income populations, and have neighborhoods under the national average for tree canopy density.

Working with a WA DNR GIS analyst, staff used freely available US census data, state stormwater permit information, the tree canopy data layer from the US Geological Survey's National Land Cover Database (30 m resolution), and Washington's Forest Action Plan priorities to identify and rank 38 of 281 Washington cities that met the criteria.

Since data was initially filtered to identify communities subject to federal and state stormwater regulations, the analysis is biased toward Washington's largest cities, since it excludes small communities not subject to stormwater permits. Larger cities are also likely to have a greater number of census block groups, and a higher percentage of their population met the filtering criteria.

While the report is not perfect, and the need for additional data is clear, the purpose of the project was to investigate equity in urban forestry in Washington cities. It has increased awareness within WA DNR of the need to better assist communities to work closely with residents to engage diverse populations throughout the state.

This year, with assistance from the Washington Community Forestry Council and in partnership with the USDA Forest Service, the WA DNR launched a pilot environmental justice grant. The intent of the grant is to help communities engage with residents at the neighborhood level as they plan urban forestry projects to enhance tree canopy.

Recognizing that small communities often have reduced staff capacity to write grants, WA DNR also offers a Small Communities Forestry Assistance Grant to communities with populations under 10,000. To assure success, WA DNR first requests a letter of interest proposing a project, then works closely with community leaders to design fundable projects.

Other environmental justice investments in Washington have been funded through USDA Forest Service Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) grants in collaboration with several partners:

- City of Tacoma - neighborhood engagement to plan green stormwater infrastructure and tree canopy in the rapidly densifying Tacoma Mall Regional Growth Center.
- The Nature Conservancy - a multi-county regional tree planting plan for cities in the three highest populated counties in western Washington.
- Forterra - working with youth to restore an urban watershed using trees as green stormwater infrastructure in the central Puget Sound region.

More importantly, WA DNR is working to assure that environmental justice is integrated into all aspects of the program.



The tree board in Fairfield, Washington celebrates Arbor Day with a new ponderosa pine. Photo Credit: WA DNR



Middle school students help plant Arbor Day trees in Seattle. Photo Credit: WA DNR

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Washington State Department of Natural Resources
Urban and Community Forestry Program
<https://www.dnr.wa.gov/urbanforestry>