

Testimony
Legislative Budget Committee
Jason Hartman
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Kansas Forest Service
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Chairman Billinger and Members of the Legislative Budget Committee:

Good Afternoon. My name is Jason Hartman. I serve as the State Forester for the Kansas Forest Service. I am pleased to testify before you today on the Community Wildfire Defense Grant program.

The Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) program is part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). The legislative intent is to assist at-risk local communities and Indian Tribes with planning for and mitigating the risk created by wildfires. Overall, the CWDG program has provision for \$1 billion of funding over 5 years (\$200 million per year). This federal funding is available to Federal and State Forestry Agencies to provide administrative support of the program with the remainder being distributed to local jurisdictions and Tribes via competitive application processes (FFY 22 breakdown was approximately \$40 million administrative and \$160 million competitive).

However, that amount further breaks down into two broad eligibility pools, two main project types, and various eligibility criteria. The two broad eligibility pools are those communities that have a wildfire resistant roofing ordinance and those communities that do not. Half of the competitive funding will be available for each pool per year. The two main project types are 1) Development/revision of a community wildfire protection plan (CWPP) and 2) Implementation of projects described in a current CWPP. For each of the project types, applications must meet two base criteria. First, the area the funding will apply to must include an at-risk community as defined by the US Departments of Agriculture and Interior or recognized as such by a state, regional, or national wildfire risk assessment. Second, the funding can only be eligible to go to, local governments, Tribes, non-profits, and State forestry agencies. After these two base eligibility elements are met applications are ranked and rated by additional criteria with some of the criteria being common to both project types and others applying only to one project type or the other. For example, the implementation of a CWPP project type has a further evaluation criterion that the actions being applied for must be part of a CWPP that is less than 10 years old. Both project types receive additional ranking support for; being in an area identified as having high or very high wildfire hazard, the project area serving a low-income community; and/or including a community impacted by a severe disaster. CWPP development projects are capped at \$250,000 per application and implementation projects are capped at \$10 million per application.

In July of 2022 the Kansas Forest Service received notice from the US Forest Service that we could expect approximately \$275,000 in administrative funds to develop a program that would provide assistance to eligible entities in Kansas to make them aware of the CWDG opportunity, evaluate their eligibility, prepare projects and applications, and administer any awarded funds. We are pleased that unlike previous similar grant programs that the CWDG program provided for these administrative funds as this gives us the capacity to better help local jurisdictions be successful with the CWDG program by providing both our wildland fire and natural resources management experience and knowledge to them as we evaluate potential projects together. KFS has to date used those funds to add a staff member with specialization in wildfire risk reduction, is currently recruiting for a grants manager, and has partnered

Reference: USDA Forest Service State and Private Forestry Fiscal Year 2022 Community Wildfire Defense Grant Notice of Funding Opportunity Instructions, West (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/Instruction-CWSF-CWDG-NOFO.pdf>)

with the grants management expertise of staff within our parent organization of Kansas State University and Kansas State Research and Extension.

Word of the CWDG program in Kansas was spread via social media, the KFS website, and direct email contact with KFS' fire department partners. Follow-up in-person meetings were held with KFS staff responding to requests of local officials to discuss CWDG opportunities in their communities. These KFS awareness raising efforts were in addition to the efforts of national and regional entities such as the White House, US Forest Service, and the Council of Western State Foresters.

The 2022 application period closed only a little more than two months after the official Notice of Funding Opportunity was released by the White House in late July. In that short time frame KFS met with several local jurisdictions who had interest in the program and secured a contractor with the needed experience and capacity to develop CWPP's for Kansas local jurisdictions. When the application deadline arrived in early October Kansas submitted 3 applications of the CWPP development project type. Conversations during the 2022 application period indicate at least 3 additional jurisdictions plan to apply next year. We also are beginning to look now at opportunities for implementation type projects that could be applied for in 2023. The Kansas applications will be scored by a committee of judges from across the 17 Western US and Pacific Islands members of the Council of Western State Foresters. Those scores will be sent to the US Forest Service Washington DC Office to be combined with applications from the Southern and Northeast/Midwest regions of the National Association of State Foresters to create the final ranking list and determine which projects will be awarded funding. Nationally about 500 applications were submitted including all states, territories, and Tribes.

In closing, the CWDG program is an exciting new addition to already existing opportunities for Kansas communities to leverage federal funding to be better prepared for and to mitigate the potential damage from wildfires. It is, however not a completely new concept and in the past Kansas applications to similar programs have not always been highly competitive on the national scene.

Chair Billinger, thank you again to you and the members of the Legislative Budget Committee for the opportunity to testify today . I am happy to stand for questions.