

# Innovative Finance for National Forests

## Request for Proposals Proposals Due April 22, 2024

**The Innovative Finance for National Forests (IFNF) grant program supports the development and implementation of innovative finance models that leverage private and public capital other than U.S. Forest Service (USFS) appropriations to enhance the resilience of the National Forest System and deliver commensurate returns to stakeholders.**

The IFNF grant program seeks to:

- Leverage private and public *capital other than USFS appropriations* to support agency priorities.
- Deliver measurable *social, ecological, and financial outcomes* to multiple stakeholders.
- Demonstrate solutions that promise improved *financial sustainability* for land management.
- Chart a *path to scale* in addressing landscape-level challenges on and near National Forests.
- Generate *lessons learned* to incorporate in agency management and decision making.

IFNF grants could, but are not limited to, support of innovative finance models that:

- Enable *debt and/or equity financing* from public or private sources to pay for upfront project costs that will be paid back over time by project beneficiaries (payors).
- Access new or existing *markets* for environmental goods or services.
- Access *user-based* fees or contributions.
- Increase pace and scale of implementation by *blending multiple sources* of funding or finance.
- Employ any combination of the approaches listed above.

The 2024 IFNF grant program emphasizes three Focus Areas:

- 1) Wildfire resilience and recovery
- 2) Watershed health
- 3) Sustainable recreation infrastructure and access

Across these Focus Areas, the IFNF grant program provides funding for three Project Types:

- 1) Feasibility
- 2) Pilot
- 3) Scaling

Project activities may take place on National Forest System lands, on adjacent state, private or tribal lands, or across boundaries, provided project outcomes contribute to the health of the National Forest System. The IFNF Focus Areas and Project Types are explained below.

The IFNF grant program is funded and administered by the USDA Forest Service National Partnership Office (NPO) and the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities (Endowment). See page 8 for the IFNF program contact.

*Webinar:* An informational webinar will be hosted by the IFNF team on Wednesday, January 17<sup>th</sup> 1-2pm EST. [Register for the informational webinar here.](#)

*Proposal Feedback Opportunity:* Interested applicants have the option of engaging with one of IFNF's technical assistance advisors, Gordian Knot Strategies, to receive feedback on their application ideas prior to submission. [Applicants interested in receiving feedback should register their interest from December 4<sup>th</sup> – April 8<sup>th</sup> on a first come, first served basis.](#) See page 8 of this RFP for more information.

**For the latest information on the IFNF program please check back regularly at:**

<https://www.usendowment.org/ifnf/>

## **IFNF Grant Program Background**

National Forests across the United States provide important services to the American public, including clean and abundant drinking water, clean air, forest products, recreation opportunities, and local jobs. However, our National Forests face challenges that jeopardize the ecological, economic, and social benefits these landscapes provide. The impacts of catastrophic wildfire, drought, flooding, and insect and disease disturbance are increasingly severe, exacerbated by rising temperatures and growing development pressures. The scale of unmet stewardship needs on National Forests exceeds the capacity of Forest Service appropriations to address these issues.

These challenges require the development and scaling of new funding and financing approaches to support land management. Through the IFNF grant program, as well as investment in a growing [Conservation Finance Program](#), USFS is working with partners to develop financial approaches that address agency challenges. Eligible IFNF projects include, but are not limited to, finance models that leverage:

- **Private Investment** – USFS offers the potential for large-scale investment opportunities across its 193-million-acre management, with robust project pipeline opportunities across diverse issue areas and geographies. Debt-financing models that engage private investment to cover upfront project costs by promising financial returns as well as social and/or environmental outcomes are eligible. Opportunities to leverage private investment through environmental markets (e.g., compensatory mitigation, water quality, carbon) are also appropriate.
- **Public Financing** – Non-USFS public financing, including low-interest loan funds, bonds, or other public debt from federal, state, or local sources are eligible. Examples include but are not limited to EPA State Revolving Fund (SRF) loans, USDA Rural Development loans, FEMA Emergency Relief for Federally Owned Roads (ERFO) funds, and Safeguarding Tomorrow through Ongoing Risk Mitigation (STORM) funds. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act have significantly increased the scale of public financing available through some of these federal programs, making it an opportune time to consider public financing approaches.
- **Blended approaches** – IFNF welcomes approaches that combine private investment, public finance, philanthropy, and/or corporate sustainability dollars into public-private partnership models.

### **HOW CAN HEALTHY FORESTS DELIVER A FINANCIAL RETURN?**

Generating a financial return from land management activities enables USFS projects to make use of capital from private investment and public financing that could not otherwise be brought to bear on agency challenges. Financial returns are derived from money made or money saved. Examples below are relevant for federal and/or non-federal ownership.

Examples of **money made** include:

- Revenues from forests (e.g., timber, recreation, hunting lease)
- Sale of environmental market credits (e.g., water, wetlands, habitat, carbon)
- Enhanced benefit from conservation outcomes (e.g., tourism, local tax revenue, water quality)

Examples of **money saved** include:

- Increased efficiency of operations (e.g., delivery of recreational services, economies of scale for forest stewardship)
- Avoided future costs through activities that reduce risks associated with disturbance such as flooding or wildfire

To provide a financial return, entities that make or save money (payers) must commit to dedicating a portion of money made or saved back to the financier.

## **IFNF Grant Program Overview**

IFNF is a competitive grant program. Applications following the guidelines below will be considered.

**Grant Size:** Maximum grant award sizes for the three project types are: Feasibility: \$150,000; Pilot: \$300,000; Scaling: \$500,000. Please review the project type descriptions and discuss any variance for your proposal with the program contact. Approximately \$2 million is available in 2024.

**Existing Grantees:** Current grantees may apply for funding for a new project proposal. If you wish to apply for additional funding for an ongoing project, please discuss your approach with the IFNF program contact listed on page 8 before applying. In general, requests for additional funding for an ongoing project should advance your work to a new Project Type (e.g., if you received a Feasibility grant, you could apply for a Pilot grant this round).

**Eligible Applicants:** Not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organizations; for-profit companies; tribes; intertribal consortia; state and local government agencies, and colleges and universities. A single organization or a consortia/team of organizations may apply. Applicants may submit multiple proposals if projects or geographic areas are distinct. Unincorporated individuals are not eligible. Forest Service units and programs cannot receive funding directly.

IFNF does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior credible activity.

**Contract Length:** Applicants must complete proposed objectives and milestones within a maximum three-year contract period; shorter contracts are acceptable. For multi-year grants, funds will be renewed annually based on grantee performance determined by a yearly review.

**Match:** Non-federal match of cash or in-kind services is not required, but it is encouraged and should be noted in the budget if secured.

**Jurisdiction and Ownership:** IFNF projects must contribute to the resilience of the National Forest System but may occur on: National Forest System Lands; adjacent state, private, and tribal lands; or cross-boundary landscapes that include both National Forests and adjacent lands. Projects that take place exclusively on adjacent lands must demonstrate a benefit to the National Forest System and show local USFS unit or Regional Office support.

**Forest Service Engagement:** USFS engagement is critical to the success of all IFNF grants. While USFS units cannot directly receive IFNF funds, applications for Pilot Projects or Scaling Projects should reference at least one specific USFS agency unit or program as cooperator(s) to host or facilitate activities (e.g., Mendocino National Forest, Region 5 Watershed Program), and describe how they will be involved (e.g., timber sale prep, project design or planning, stakeholder engagement, implementation cost-share, support for local collaboratives/contractors).

Applicants may request funding for activities that increase local USFS unit capacity and engagement. IFNF program contacts can help applicants with connections to USFS units or programs and with any challenges related to use of funds for these purposes.

### ***Ineligible Activities and Limitations on Activities:***

- Operations/administration beyond recovered indirect costs.
- Lobbying, litigation, or political advocacy. Other limitations may be found at [2 CFR Part 200](#).
- Solicitation of funds on behalf of USFS. Note that IFNF grants may be used to secure funds that benefit USFS, but

they must be solicited on behalf of other project stakeholders that share mutual-interest and mutual-benefit with the agency. The Forest Service Handbook 1509.11 states that “The Forest Service, or anyone acting on behalf of the Forest Service, does not have the authority to solicit money, either verbally or in writing.”

- Match for any other federal program.
- Total project costs in the following areas may not exceed 15% of request: education, interpretation, land management planning (NEPA), convening, natural science research, monitoring.
- Implementation of on-the-ground project activities such as forest restoration or infrastructure improvements (e.g., forest thinning, tree planting, trail repair).

### **IFNF Grant Program Requirements**

#### **Focus Areas:**

IFNF Focus Areas address the most pressing environmental and budgetary challenges faced by the USFS and present the best opportunities to demonstrate the viability of new financial tools. IFNF projects must address one or more of the following Focus Areas:

- I. *Wildfire Resilience and Recovery:*** Recent wildfire seasons highlight the challenges associated with keeping communities safe and more resilient to the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events. These challenges underscore a growing need for new land management strategies within USFS—one that is designed to support strategic managing and restoration of millions of acres of land in high-risk areas to protect forest health, watershed function, and human infrastructure. In January 2022, USFS released its Wildfire Crisis Strategy to address these growing conditions. Despite ongoing process in implementation, increased levels of investment are needed to support resilient communities and landscapes.
- II. *Watershed Health:*** National Forests and adjacent lands comprise an important network of natural infrastructure that supports clean and abundant drinking water, resilience to natural and human disturbance, and aquatic habitat. An estimated 150 million residents in more than 68,000 communities across the U.S. rely on forested lands to capture and filter their drinking water. The National Forest System is the country’s single largest source of water and a municipal water source for 80 million residents across 33 states and over 5,000 public water systems. As of 2021, the USFS has identified 350 priority watersheds with a backlog of over \$675 million in watershed projects.
- III. *Sustainable Recreation Infrastructure and Access:*** The National Forest System and adjacent landscapes provide a range of recreational opportunities that serve a diverse American public as they connect with nature and access outdoor experiences. National Forests hosted more than 159 million recreational visits in 2022 with visitors spending around \$11 billion on services in nearby communities. To serve growing numbers of visitors while protecting natural and cultural resources, the infrastructure facilitating these experiences must be well-maintained and financially and environmentally sustainable. The USFS has identified a backlog of close to \$6 billion in deferred maintenance on recreation infrastructure across its management.

Focus Areas should not be treated by applicants as mutually exclusive. Project ideas with benefits and revenue streams spanning Focus Areas are welcome. In some cases, stacking benefits across the Focus Areas may help to achieve financing goals and meet revenue needs.

Where relevant, applicants are also encouraged to highlight connections with Forest Service priorities

related to wildfire ([Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#)), climate change ([Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis](#), [USDA Memo on Climate Resilience](#), and [USFS Climate Adaptation Plan](#)) and environmental justice ([Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity](#), [USFS Tribal Action Plan](#), [USFS Equity Action Plan](#)), and to consider ways to leverage recent infusions of federal funds through the Great American Outdoors Act, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and Inflation Reduction Act.

IFNF applications may address other land management challenges or opportunities, such as biodiversity conservation, biomass and bioenergy, or other wood products, if one of the key Focus Areas is primarily addressed.

**Project Types:**

IFNF supports the design and execution of innovative finance models that show potential to address land management challenges at scale. Funds should be used for activities that support the development, structuring, or scaling of innovative financing models that bring private and public capital other than USFS appropriations to bear on land management. Funds may be used to grow capacity and develop governance structures that support financial innovation. IFNF-supported projects might offer:

- Completely new finance ideas and models.
- New applications of approaches used in other sectors (e.g., health care, social services); or
- New applications of models used for land management elsewhere (e.g., private lands) are now applied to the National Forest System.

Applications will be considered for the following project types:

- I. **Feasibility Projects:** Projects in this early-stage category of exploring an idea via research and development should contribute new knowledge or tools that could enable new forms of investment in USFS priorities. Potential projects can include financial innovation (new financial instruments, contracting structures, partnership models), customer and market discovery (surveys, customer/user research), or measurement and quantification (data collection, analysis, costs and benefits, use of technology for monitoring). Projects that combine market discovery or measurement with financial innovation are encouraged. Projects that do not directly address financial innovation should demonstrate a clear case for why their R&D will facilitate financial innovation. Maximum award size \$150,000.

***Feasibility Case Study: ECONorthwest “Central OR National Forest Dedicated Recreation Funding”  
Funded October 2021***

*Deschutes County’s population has grown by 72% over the last 20 years, adding to the number of visitors to nearby national forests. While visitation and use have increased, recreational funding and resources have not increased at a rate that can keep up with this growth. This mismatch of resources and use is causing already stressed infrastructure to fall into disrepair. To help solve this issue, ECONorthwest sought to answer the following question with its IFNF Feasibility Study grant: What is the most efficient structure for a national forest recreation funding system based on its users and beneficiaries? To answer this question, ECONorthwest used IFNF grant funding to quantify the economic benefits that recreation brings to visitors and the local economy, as well as the investments needed to maintain these benefits. This information will then be used to identify a funding system for the two National Forests. [See more information on the project here.](#)*

**II. Pilot Projects:** Projects in this category should enable on-the-ground implementation of pilot models or approaches that present innovation in securing capital other than USFS appropriations for projects on National Forest System or adjacent lands. Pilot projects will ideally provide opportunities for future replication and/or scaling. Projects might pilot new revenue or repayment sources, or new payment instruments. Maximum award size is \$300,000.

**Pilot Case Study: Summit County, UT “Defueling the Fire: Piloting a Resilience Fund for the Weber Watershed”  
Funded October 2021**

*With funds from an IFNF pilot project grant, Utah’s Summit County worked with partners to develop a Resilience Fund that pools funding commitments from local public and private entities to support restoration work across USFS, state, and private lands. The Resilience Fund supports the 1) upfront costs of watershed restoration and forest health fuel reduction treatments, and 2) invests in the long-term maintenance of watershed protection through an endowment. As of July 2023, the Resilience Fund has raised \$7 million, with contributions from federal, state, and local sources. The Resilience Fund model is now being scaled to other tributaries of the Great Salt Lake through a Scaling IFNF grant awarded to Summit County’s partner, World Resources Institute, in May 2023. [See more information on the project here.](#)*

**III. Scaling Projects:** IFNF seeks to support finance tools that function at the scale required to address sizable backlogs of unfunded work. Projects in this category should enable on-the-ground implementation at a larger scale and/or faster pace than currently exists, by securing capital other than USFS appropriations. Scaling could be achieved through the expansion of previously piloted models to new geographies, by aggregating projects across landscapes, landowners, and stakeholders, or by employing intermediaries that help capital flow at greater scale. Scaling financial models may also align with investor interest in larger-scale investment opportunities. Maximum award size is \$500,000.

**Scaling Case Study: Blue Forest “Refining and Expanding the Forest Resilience Bond”  
Funded May 2020**

*Blue Forest developed the Forest Resilience Bond (FRB) in partnership with the USFS to accelerate the pace and scale of wildfire risk reduction across the National Forest System. The FRB model raises upfront private capital to fund forest health treatments, using a collaborative framework that brings together stakeholders that benefit from restoration to share the costs of reimbursing investors over time. After successfully designing, developing, and implementing a pilot FRB on the Tahoe National Forest in 2018, IFNF funds supported Blue Forest’s efforts to scale the model to larger project footprints, new geographies, and new beneficiary funding streams. [See more information on the project here.](#)*

Determining the correct Project Type is a key component of the application because it has implications on the specific questions asked to applicants. To assist applicants in selecting the correct Project Type for their idea, please see the following criteria. The IFNF contact listed on page 8 can provide guidance as to what Project Type fits your proposed idea.

Feasibility	Pilot	Scaling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This project is in the early phase of exploration and design. The proposed project is an initial determination of project viability.</li> <li>No resulting land management activities will occur within the lifecycle of the IFNF grant.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This project will test an idea that has been deemed viable or has already undergone initial research and development.</li> <li>Land management activities will be implemented within the lifecycle of the grant, as a result of the innovative finance project.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This financial model has been piloted before and this project is now attempting to implement that model in a new geography, more quickly, on a larger scale, or all the above.</li> <li>Land management activities will be implemented within the lifecycle of the grant, as a result of the innovative finance project.</li> </ul>

*Note on Pilot vs. Scaling Projects:* While every project is different, applicants should consider \$3 million as a minimum threshold for unfunded project needs to attract upfront private investment. Pilot Projects should aim to mobilize up to \$10 million in capital and Scaling Projects greater than \$10 million in capital.

### **IFNF Application Review Criteria**

Applications to the IFNF program will be vetted using the criteria and point values below. Applicants should consider these criteria as they develop project ideas and articulate those ideas in the proposal. The questions in the online application form follow these criteria.

- 1. Problem Statement (15 points):** The project addresses a well-defined challenge that is significant, broadly recognized, and pressing for key stakeholders.
- 2. National Forest System Nexus (10 points):** The relevance of the challenge and proposed solution to the National Forest System is clear. For Pilot and Scaling projects the role of the USFS unit and/or program in the project is clear.
- 3. Team and Partners (10 points):** The project team is qualified to address the competencies called for in the proposed project and includes necessary partners, as measured by their project fit, motivation, and experience. Partners are identified and/or committed to the project.
- 4. Policy (5 points):** There is sufficient due diligence on legal, policy, and regulatory factors to provide high confidence that potential barriers or risks in this domain are low or navigable within the lifecycle of the IFNF grant.
- 5. Practices and Methods (5 points):** The project relies on practices that are proven or likely to be effective, based on evidence, and that are implementable, affordable, and applicable. For Feasibility Projects, the project's methodology is appropriate, robust, and reflects state-of-the-art practices. For pilot and scaling projects, the land management practices and financial innovation practices are effective and state-of-the-art.
- 6. Payors (i.e., direct payment or repayment) (15 points):** Entities (other than USFS) that are willing and able to pay for the outputs/impact that the project generates in order to shoulder project costs and provide either direct funding or repayment of financing sources are identified and preferably committed. Please submit Payor Letter of Support for pilot and scaling projects (use this letter of support [template](#)). Note, submission of the Payor Letter(s) of Support is an important element of the proposal evaluation.
- 7. Financing Sources (i.e., upfront capital) (10 points, only scored if financing is applicable to project):** If required, public or private entities (other than USFS) that are likely to provide sufficient upfront capital to cover the project financing needs through debt or equity models are identified.
- 8. Project Site(s) and Readiness (5 points):** Viable project site(s) and/or partner(s) required for on-the-ground implementation are identified and ready to engage. Land management practices identified are effective and applicable.
- 9. Impact and Scaling Potential (10 points):** The project has potential to unlock capital other than USFS appropriations through new financing models, or to scale-up existing models to accelerate on-the-ground implementation.

- 10. Measurable Outcomes (5 points):** Detailed metrics and processes are in place to measure economic, environmental, and/or social outcomes, or there are robust plans for developing them.
- 11. Co-creation (5 points):** Appropriate constituents in the project region are engaged in the co-creation of the proposed solution to ensure optimal uptake of the conservation practices and interventions envisioned.
- 12. Barriers to Success (5 points):** Credible plans to address barriers to success are in place.
- 13. Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (5 points).** Project footprint overlaps with an underserved community and/or project efforts engage the local community where work will be occurring.
- 14. Workplan (10 points).** Proposal provides clear and reasonable timeline, activities, and/or deliverables, and strategies to achieve them.
- 15. Budget (5 points):** The budget is sufficient for the proposed timeline, activities, and deliverables.

### **IFNF Application Process**

*General Proposal Support:* The IFNF application process should be interactive. IFNF staff look forward to working with applicants to develop concepts and proposals. Interested parties are encouraged to contact the following IFNF team member from the USFS National Partnership Office with general program questions, for help determining the right Project Type fit, and for assistance identifying USFS Points of Contact:

- Sophie Beavin, Conservation Finance Partnership Coordinator ([sophie.beavin@usda.gov](mailto:sophie.beavin@usda.gov))

*Proposal Feedback Opportunity:* Interested applicants have the option of engaging with one of IFNF's technical assistance advisors, Gordian Knot Strategies ([GKS](#)), to receive feedback on their application ideas prior to submission. GKS is experienced at helping applicants design programs, projects, and initiatives that are optimally positioned for success, and will provide project proposal support drawing on learnings from the [Arches Framework](#) it created with the Conservation Finance Network in 2021 with the support of the Walton Family Foundation. The application review criteria above are based on this Framework.

To support the IFNF application feedback process GKS and [DECO](#) developed the online Traro Platform to house the Arches Framework to help applicants identify and receive feedback on the seven critical elements needed to effectively design and implement high impact conservation finance projects. Applicants interested in receiving feedback through the Arches Platform should register their interest on <http://www.enkrateia.io/traro> from December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023, through April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023, on a first come, first-serve basis.

Engagement with the Traro Platform is designed to guide applicants on potential improvements to their project design, ensure that their ultimate submittal is truly addressing the questions asked, and improve the quality of design for the proposed project type. It is recommended that applicants take advantage of the free Arches tool to craft their proposal before final submission to the IFNF program. Note, engagement with Traro and the associated feedback *do not* guarantee the outcome of the evaluation of the final RFP submission.

*Submission:* The application and all attachments must be submitted via the Endowment's grantee portal:



<https://usendowment.my.site.com/grantee/>. **The application will be available on the Endowment's website until April 22, 2024, 8 p.m. EST.**

Note: If you already have an account from a previous Endowment project, please use those login credentials. If you are a new user, please click on "New User" and follow the instructions to create an account. Once created, click on the "View Current RFPs" tab. For portal assistance please contact [subawards@usendowment.org](mailto:subawards@usendowment.org).

Note: Please use **Google Chrome, Firefox or Safari** as your web browser when completing the application.

*Timeframe and Funding:*

- Program Announcement: December 4, 2023
- Proposal submissions due: April 22, 2024 (late applications will not be considered)
- Tentative funding decisions: June 2024

*Unique Entity Identifier (UEI), SAM.gov, and OMB Cost Principles:* Applicants must provide a current UEI number and have an active registration in SAM.gov, the federal government's system for award management. Applicants should start this registration process early to avoid delays in contracting. Purchase of equipment under this funding announcement must comply with USFS General Terms and Conditions as well as OMB Cost Principles.

*Indirect Rates:* Information about the Endowment's Indirect Cost Policy can be found [here](#). Please contact Aleta Rogers ([Aleta@usendowment.org](mailto:Aleta@usendowment.org)), Director, Grants and Contract Compliance with any questions.

*Intellectual Property and Sensitive Information:* Because this program utilizes public funding, it is the intent that any final reports will be publicly available and that program participants will share deliverables, outcomes, and lessons-learned through webinars. Please discuss intellectual property concerns with IFNF staff contacts so that sensitive information can be protected while also ensuring public dissemination.

*Awards:* Successful applicants will enter an agreement with the Endowment, making them Endowment subrecipients. As a recipient of federal funds, they must comply with all federal regulations as described in [2 CFR Part 200, Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards](#).

*Payment:* Subrecipients will invoice the Endowment quarterly on a reimbursable basis. If required, an initial advance payment may be requested.

Subrecipient Agreement terms will include defined outcomes and success measures appropriate for the contract period. Funds will be disbursed incrementally as subrecipients meet agreed-upon outcomes and quantitative/ qualitative project milestones. Subrecipients are encouraged to revisit and revise their initial milestones as needed throughout the duration of their projects. They are also required to submit interim reports and a final report documenting their achievements and lessons learned.