

Innovative Strategies to Increase Canopy Cover - From Local to National



Problem Setting

Urban areas are highly susceptible to climate change impacts, such as extreme heat, flooding and air pollution. Increasing canopy cover is a key strategy to mitigate these effects. State-level coordinators, supported by the USDA Forest Service, are leading efforts to expand tree canopy, enhance green spaces, and engage communities. This panel focuses on the role of urban forestry in building resilient communities, with panelists sharing insights on challenges and achievements.

Speakers: Danica Doroski, PhD, CT DEEP; Ben Thompson, WA State Department of Natural Resources; Kalaia Tripeaux, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources; Danielle Gift, USDA Forest Service

Key Takeaways

1. BUILD TRUST AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Tripeaux and Doroski both highlighted the need to build trust at the local level, especially in communities that have had negative experiences with government agencies in the past. Specifically, they stressed the importance of active listening. Rather than rushing into communities with predefined solutions, practitioners should engage with residents to understand their unique needs and perspectives. Several presentations also emphasized the importance of prioritizing vulnerable communities, with the goal of creating equitable access to tree canopy benefits.

2. INCREASE DATA COLLECTION EFFORTS

Panelists agreed that urban forestry researchers and practitioners should expand data collection and analysis efforts. Special emphasis was placed on gathering data on tree canopy location, community demographics and pollution exposure to inform decision-making and resource allocation. The panelists stressed the importance of these data points, as they provide information essential to identifying where resources can be most effectively channeled to create positive change.

3. LEVERAGE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

The panel highlighted the importance of leveraging both state and federal funding opportunities, as well as establishing partnerships between organizations and key stakeholders to raise the impact of urban forestry programs. Federal funding can provide states and communities with the financial and technical assistance required to plan and implement effective urban forestry programs. The substantial funding provided by the Biden Administration's Inflation Reduction Act as well as other federal programs amounts to billions of dollars, underscoring the federal commitment to addressing urban forestry issues.

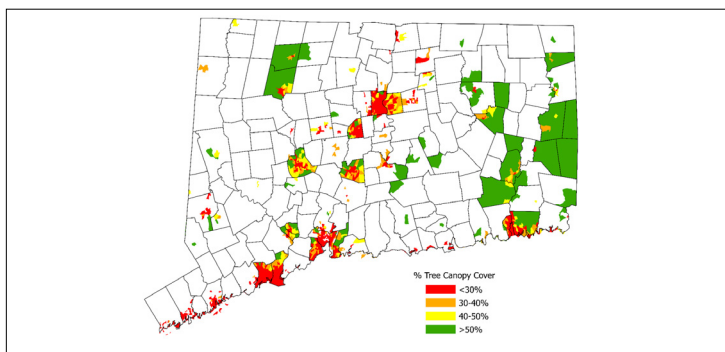
4. RECOGNIZE URBAN FORESTRY AS A PROFESSION

All four panelists pointed to the need for urban forestry to be recognized as a profession in its own right. Panelists and audience members highlighted that urban forestry is not just about planting trees, but encompasses a broader set of practices and sciences. It was agreed that one priority should be raising awareness of the profession's importance among policymakers and communities.

Implementation Examples

CONNECTICUT URBAN FORESTRY PROGRAM

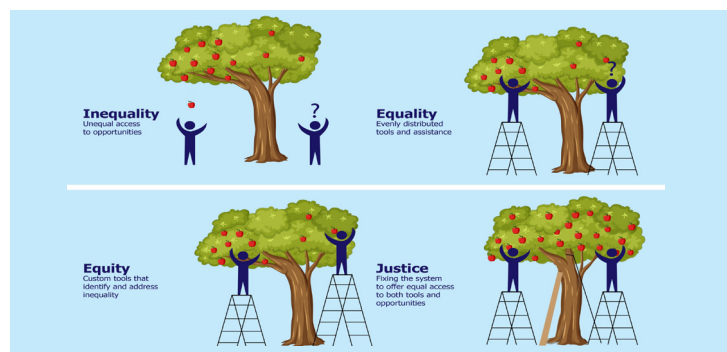
Connecticut invested significantly in its urban forestry efforts in 2021, creating two grant programs to address climate change and environmental justice. The “Climate Change Grant Program” is targeted toward established non-profits and municipalities with a track record of urban forestry projects. The “Urban Forest Equity Through Capacity Building Grant Program” is targeted at non-profits, municipalities, and community groups newer to the practice of urban forestry. Together, these two programs focus on capacity building, barrier reduction, geographic prioritization and leveraging funding from state and federal sources.



Tree canopy cover in environmental justice communities in CT.
Source: CTDEEP in Doroski conference presentation 2023.

PENNSYLVANIA TREEVITALIZE PROGRAM

Pennsylvania’s program is a collaborative initiative developed by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). The program aims to enhance community capabilities in the planning, planting and maintenance of trees. Special focus is placed on community-specific initiatives, public stewardship and trust-building. The program also provides technical assistance, including grant writing services, for environmentally disadvantaged communities. The program has received substantial funding to address various environmental burdens.



The principles of tree equity. Source: Design adapted from Tony Ruth’s Giving Tree art of inequality/equality/equity/justice. Used in Kalaia Tripeux’ Conference presentation 2023.

EVERGREEN COMMUNITIES ACT (RCW 76.15)

Washington State passed a foundational piece of urban forestry legislation in 2021 that mandated the identification of priority regions for urban forestry programs. Additionally, the state obtained high-resolution tree canopy data that is crucial for informed decision-making and urban planning. Ben Thompson noted the importance of using data on urban tree canopy, salmon habitat and community health disparities to guide both decision-making and collaboration efforts with tribes focused on watershed management.

PRIORITY ACTION: INTEGRATE AND STANDARDIZE DATA

High-quality data helps create high-quality outcomes. There is an urgent need to develop standardized data practices for urban forestry programs to enable better coordination and resource allocation.

NEXT STEPS:

ACCESS valuable resources on how to design and implement an urban forestry program in your community at www.vibrantcitieslab.com.

LEARN more about Pennsylvania’s Tree Equity Specialist program at www.dcnr.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx.

Watch the entire conference panel [online here](#).

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