



# The Federal Appropriations Process

A supplement to *Communities and Forests*, the newsletter of the

Communities Committee of the 7th American Forest Congress

This Quick Guide was developed to provide community forestry activists with a tool to make it easier to engage in national policy. The first issue discusses the federal appropriations process and how you can get involved. The Communities Committee plans to publish more guides in 1999 on other policy issues. We welcome your feedback, suggestions, and help. Thank you!

The federal appropriations process is one of the most important parts of public policy. Unlike authorizing bills, which establish programs and policies, appropriations bills fund programs and must pass every year or the federal government shuts down.

As a community forestry activist or practitioner, you have unique expertise and understanding of what happens when federal programs reach the ground. Unfortunately, congressional members—especially those who decide how programs are funded—do not hear from community foresters often enough. Sharing your expertise will help Congress make more informed decisions and ensure your voice is heard. It will also affect how much money is spent on the programs that mean the most to you.

## The Federal Appropriations Process

The U.S. Constitution requires all government spending bills to originate in the House of Representatives. House bills generally respond to proposals from the Administration. The Senate then responds to the House. The House and Senate Appropriations Committees provide funding for authorized federal programs and agencies and oversee the use of those funds. Each side has 13 appropriations subcommittees. The Budget Committees determine overall discretionary spending levels for Congress, and the Appropriations Committees determine allocations for each of the 13 subcommittees. These so-called 602(b) allocations set absolute limits on expenditures for the subcommittees.

The Interior Appropriations Subcommittees write the Interior and Related Agencies spending bill, which funds most agencies and programs critical to community-based forestry. The Interior spending bill funds 35 different agencies, including those in the Department



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terior, such as the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, and related agencies, as the USDA Forest Service.

### What makes the appropriations process unique?

1. It must happen every year to keep the government operating.
2. Although House rules prohibit authorizing legislation in appropriations bills, Congress sometimes attaches legislative provisions as 'riders' (see box).
3. Unlike authorizing bills, which make policy, the point of appropriations is to distribute federal funds.

### RIDERS

A rider is a legislative proposal that is attached to a seemingly unrelated piece of legislation. Often riders have been debated or acted upon in committee but, for whatever reason, were not passed. Other riders have seen no legislative activity at all. Riders can be debated on the House or Senate floor, and they are subject to additional procedural actions (like points of order) on the House side.

The legislative path of an appropriations bill in either the House or Senate generally looks like this:

1. **Introduction**—the subcommittee chair writes the bill and introduces it to Congress.
2. **Hearings**—the subcommittee listens to constituent concerns and the Administration's priorities.
3. **Mark-up**—subcommittee members work on the bill to make it reflect their priorities. They also draft report language, which accompanies the appropriations bill, explaining priorities and giving direction to federal agencies.
4. **Committee votes**—the subcommittee votes on the final proposal, and passes it to the full committee. The full committee can also make changes before voting and passing the bill for action on the House or Senate floor.
5. **Floor vote**—the bill is considered on the floor of the House or Senate.



- 6. **Conference**—House and Senate members are appointed to a conference committee to iron out differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill.
- 7. **Final passage**—the House and Senate take action on the final bill coming out of conference.
- 8. **Presidential signature**—the bill is presented to the President. If he signs it, it becomes law. If he vetoes it, a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate is needed to override the veto. Otherwise, Congress must address the President’s concerns.

Each step in this process is an opportunity to create or change the proposed legislation. The further into the process, the harder it is to affect the bill.

### Federal appropriations timeline

The timeline below shows how the annual appropriations process should unfold. In recent years, the final budget has not passed on time. If Congress reaches the start of the fiscal year without a budget in place, it usually passes a continuing resolution which temporarily funds the federal government. If it fails to do so, the government shuts down. Congressional members and staff are constrained by this calendar. Getting them information at the right time of year is as important as getting them accurate information.

## How to Get Involved

### Build Relationships

Working with Congress is a lot like working in communities: Developing relationships is essential. Building strong relationships takes time but will help in the long run.

### Tips on building relationships:

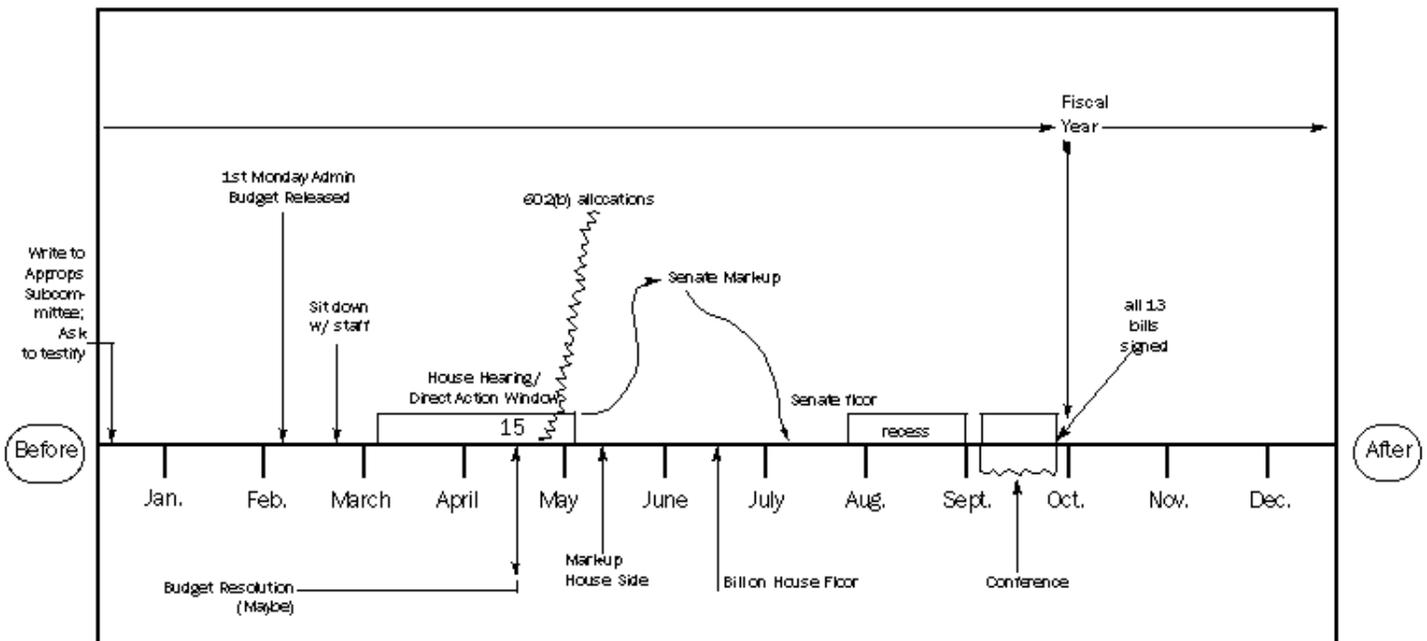
- 1. Participate early in the appropriations process.
- 2. Identify congressional champions for your issues. Build long-term interest in your issues and a base of trust.
  - Be an accessible information resource.
  - Provide accurate, reliable, and timely information.
- 3. Understand what motivates congressional members and staff.
  - Votes.
  - Money. The more federal funding spent in their district, the more they will pay attention to a program.
- 4. Understand what constrains them.
  - The legislative calendar.
  - Priorities of other legislators.

### Build Coalitions

Working with other groups and organizations can leverage and strengthen your capacity to affect the appropriations process.

- 1. Work on areas of common ground.
- 2. Pay attention to others’ agendas and work with them.
- 3. Build power and influence by being well organized.
- 4. Work with traditional and non-traditional allies.
  - Example: Reach out to the business community.
- 5. Educate a broad range of people.
- 6. Develop unique messages that are clear and simple.
- 7. Work with your county government.
- 8. Work with your state legislature.
- 9. Work with your governor.
- 10. Work with agencies implementing the programs.

## Annual Appropriations Timeline





### Write Letters

An effective letter will answer the following questions:

1. Why is it critical for the federal government to fund this program? (For example, why can't the state or private sector fund this?)
2. Why should this congressional member be interested in this program? (How does it affect his or her district?)
3. How is the program—and the money—working in his or her district—your home?
4. Why is this federal agency's role important? (For example, why should the Forest Service be responsible rather than some other agency?)
5. What success has the program had in the past?
6. How much money does the program need? What program changes should be made?

### Other Tips

1. Make your letter personal. Discuss how federal money got results in your community.
2. Be aware of the President's baseline numbers presented in the budget, and the funding levels enacted last year—but feel free to ask for more when you advocate for your programs of interest. (See web resources to find these documents.)
3. Follow up with phone calls to your representatives in the Washington, D.C. and district offices. Try to make an appoint-

ment in the district office when your representative is in town. These meetings are surprisingly easy to schedule and help build relationships.

### Who to write

1. Your representatives in your home district and in D.C.
2. Your senators.
3. Copy the chairs of the relevant House and Senate subcommittees with jurisdiction over the programs in which you're interested.
4. You may also write directly to the relevant subcommittee chairs, but it's important they see a "cc" that shows you're working through your own member of Congress. National organizations should write to the relevant subcommittee chairs. Get your grassroots supporters to contact their representatives.

FOR INTERIOR PROGRAMS
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>HOUSE</b>            The Honorable Ralph Regula            Interior Appropriations Subcommittee            B-308 RHOB            U.S. House of Representatives            Washington, DC 20515</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SENATE</b>            The Honorable Slade Gorton            Interior Appropriations Subcommittee            SD 131            United States Senate            Washington, DC 20510</p>

## PROFILE ON ECONOMIC ACTION PROGRAMS

Many federal programs are important to urban and rural community forestry activists. In this Quick Guide, we provide a brief look at Economic Action Programs (EAP), which have helped many rural practitioners. Understanding how your federal programs work and how they relate to other areas of government is the first step to working effectively in the appropriations process.

The State and Private Forestry arm of the USDA Forest Service has three major program areas: Forest Health Management, Cooperative Fire Protection, and Cooperative Forestry. Cooperative Forestry includes EAP and other programs that assist landowners and communities. Some of these programs include Forest Stewardship, the Stewardship Incentives Program, Forest Legacy, Urban and Community Forestry, and Pacific Northwest Assistance. The Forest Stewardship, Stewardship Incentives, and Forest Legacy programs are designed to help protect and keep private forest lands productive and sustainable.

EAP consists of four programs: Wood in Transportation, Forest Products Conservation and Recycling, Rural Development, and Economic Recovery. The last two are often referred to as Rural Community Assistance (RCA).

*Wood in Transportation (WIT):* WIT stimulates and expands markets for wood in transportation applications such as highway and pedestrian bridges, sound barriers, signs, and railway and water block structures. This program is supposed to provide innovative ways to maintain rural infrastructure using wood products.

*Forest Products Conservation and Recycling:* This program supports the technical assistance of specialists in logging, saw milling, drying, processing, marketing, engineering, and wood technology. It attempts to link with and reinforce Economic Recovery and Rural Development activities. Note: these funds are supposed to be leveraged to develop uses for small diameter and underutilized trees.

#### *Rural Community Assistance*

- Economic Recovery assists rural communities in or near national forests that are experiencing acute economic problems associated with changes in resource management policies and decisions. Economic Recovery has been used to help community leaders facilitate community-based planning, develop job and leadership skills, develop business plans, and devise and implement market strategies for new and existing technologies.
- Through the Rural Development program, rural communities can apply for grants that serve as matching funds for local projects and stimulate improvements in long-term economic and social well-being.



## Testify in Person

The House Interior appropriations hearing is different from a regular hearing. Some liken it to a cattle call because each person gets 5 minutes to testify before the chair and the hearing runs all day. However, testifying in person can be effective and is a good first hand experience in democracy. In late December or early January write a letter asking to testify at the House Interior appropriations hearing that takes place in March. Letters should be sent to the sub-committee chair, currently the Honorable Ralph Regula, and should be addressed "Dear Mr. Chairman."

### Also to do:

1. Contact your state representatives and copy them on your letter to Chairman Regula. If possible, meet with them in person.
2. Make appointments and visit your state representatives while you are in D.C. Let them know you are testifying.
3. Make fact sheets on your projects or on how programs have helped you. Be accurate and concise.
4. Be strategic. Remember, congressional staff may like your ideas, but votes drive their decisions.
5. If you are part of a coalition or organization, let congressional staff know. It will show your program has broad support.

### Web Resources

You can find the President's budget at:

[http://www.access.gpo.gov/su\\_docs/budget/index.html](http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/budget/index.html)

For other programs, go to the House web site:

<http://www.house.gov/>

or the House Appropriations Committee page:

<http://www.house.gov/appropriations>

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The following organizations contributed to the production of this Quick Guide. Each is willing to answer questions, provide advice, and/or assist those who come to D.C. to participate in the appropriations process.

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