

Meeting Minutes

Illinois Forestry Development Council

September 10, 2025

Location: 2118 W Park Court, Champaign, IL 61821

Attendees:

- Michael Brunk (IDNR/IFDC Liaison)
 - Thomas J Benson (IL Wildlife Society)
 - Tricia Bethke (Virtual) (IFA)
 - Casey Calvert (Illinois Walnut Council)
 - Felipe Cano (USDA)
 - Wade Conn (NRCS)
 - Justin Dodson (USDA)
 - Christopher Evans (UIUC)
 - Darrell Hampsten (Virtual) (DCEO)
 - Joe Hansen (IAA)
 - George Henshaw (USDA)
 - Kenneth Jolly (IDNR)
 - Jenny Lesko (Virtual) (ICSAF)
 - Matt Pustejovsky (ITFC)
 - Scott Schirmer (DoA)
 - Lydia Scott (Environmental Issues)
 - Scott Swisher (Virtual) (Wood Products/Primary Forest)
 - Avery Viadero (Virtual) (SIU)
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Call to Order: 10:00 AM – Chris E. – IFDC Chair

- No new members/individuals present
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Agenda Item: Review of the previous meeting minutes

- No corrections or modifications

Motion to accept: by Wade Conn, Second by Casey Calvert. Motion carries with a unanimous vote.

Agenda Item: Chair Report

Christopher Evans presents this report

- The **2025 Annual Report** is now available online. It highlights funding opportunities and projects supported by the Illinois Forestry Development Council (IFDC).
- Efforts are underway to fill the **IFDC roster** to reach a full complement of statutory and open positions. The team is working with the governor's office for appointments.

- There are currently two vacant **forest landowner** positions and one vacant **private timber grower** position being sought.
 - The **urban forester vacancy** is expected to be filled by Joe Hansen and a new person backfilling the IAA rep position.
 - The chair noted several recent and valuable forestry-related meetings across the region, including one on oak decline in Iowa and an open canopy meeting in Louisville.
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Agenda Item: Liaison Report

Michael Brunk presents this report

- **W9s and Invoice Reporting** were sent to FY26 small grant awardees. W9s have been verified from several organizations, including the Walnut Council and Illinois Forestry Association, but are still pending from County High School, a University of Illinois Extension Memorial camp, and the World Shooting Complex.
 - **Training Verifications** for the Council's state mandated trainings were requested again from grantees who submitted them previously to Eric. Eleven members have submitted their forms to date.
 - The small grant program now requires a **public write-up/general summary** from grantees to be converted into success stories for the website, aiming to better communicate the impact of the IFDC.
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Agenda Item: Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources Forestry Report

Kenneth Jolly presents this report

Legislative Updates

- The update to the **Urban and Community Forest Assistance Act** passed, spearheaded by Mike Brunk. This update modernizes the law for greater flexibility, notably:
 - Removing the mandatory 50% matching requirement to accommodate non-matching federal grants.
 - Eliminating the 5% cap on total funding that could be awarded to any one community, allowing for more substantial grants to larger cities like Chicago or Springfield.
 - Two previously unlisted **state forests** were legally added to the law.
- The "Illinois Forestry Fix" legislation, passed in 2024, now requires an annual report to the legislature on how the 4% funds are used.

- The **cost-share program**, which has not run for 8-10 years, is a point of legislative concern as it is the first listed purpose for the 4% funds.
- The administrative rules for the program were updated and legally approved in July.
- The next hurdle is developing the application form, which must comply with the Grant Accountability and Transparency Act (GATA). The goal is to start the program with the next batching period in October, if possible.

Following the mention of these two Legislative items, Scott Schirmer and Chris Evans added:

- The **Illinois Exotic Weeds Act** is moving through the JCAR process to add new regulated species relevant to forestry and horticulture, such as Callery Pear and Amur Cork Tree.
- The **Illinois Pesticide Act** was changed to offer a **continuing education (CEU) option** for license renewal, requiring 15 hours of CEUs over a three-year period as an alternative to re-testing every three years. This is expected to be implemented around 2027 and will begin with general standards and private applicators.
- The **Pesticide Applications on Rights-of-Way Notification Act** requires 24-hour public notification for any pesticide applications on public rights-of-way, which took effect on January 1st.

Federal Funding and IFDC Initiatives

- A **federal funding crisis** was created by the President's FY26 proposed budget which zeroed out state and private forestry funding, along with a significant delay in releasing FY25 funding, leading to concerns about a possible “pocket recession.” This led to a significant effort, including meetings in Washington D.C., to secure funds.
 - The FY25 funding was finally released in August, and the Forestry Division’s approved grant was awarded just days before the federal fiscal year deadline.
 - An IFDC letter of support for state and private federal funding was being drafted, but was not sent once the funding was released.
 - The risk of a FY26 continuing resolution in Congress could repeat funding uncertainties for 2026. For Illinois, federal state and private forestry funding is typically between \$3-4 million. Both urban forestry and stewardship took significant cuts in the final FY25 funding levels.
- There are **zero state government funds** currently going to the Forestry Division; funding comes solely from federal sources and the 4% Timber Harvest Fee. The Division is exploring options with budget staff for state funding in FY27.
- The **IFDC State Fair presence** was more pronounced this year with a banner featuring all participating forestry organizations. A subcommittee will be looking at how to make the IFDC presence even more clear and impactful next year.

- **Sawmill Directory Update:** Lydia Scott volunteered to update the severely out-of-date 2016 directory. The new directory will be an online resource with 36 currently verified, viable sawmills, and efforts will continue to gather more.

Personnel and Staffing

- The division lost **five forest ecologist positions** due to a lack of NRCS funding and is also down **three district foresters** (vacant for over two years). This has left the Division significantly understaffed.
 - The Division is also working to catch up on five years' worth of **property mapping** required for federal stewardship and cost-share programs, utilizing GIS interns and staff.
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Agenda Item: Program Manager reports

Urban Forestry Program Manager Report (Mike Brunk)

- The **Legacy Tree Program Task Force** was created by legislation to study and recommend a statewide program for recognizing and preserving significant trees.
 - The 17-member task force, with a facilitator (Lydia Scott) and a planning team, has four years (16 quarterly meetings) to develop recommendations.
 - The next meeting will discuss criteria categories (cultural/historical, environmental/ecological, champion trees/species significance, and aesthetics), program structure (administration, focus, voluntary/binding nature), and the inclusion of public, private, or both types of trees.

Wood Utilization Program Report (Kyle Burkwald)

- The utilization program is looking into a voluntary logger health and wellness program, inspired by a New York state model, to support logger well-being and potentially reduce insurance costs.
- Weekly **market reports** continue to be distributed to district foresters to aid in advising landowners on timber values.
- Next year's State Fair theme is **wood utilization**.
- Efforts are underway with the Department of Agriculture to expose Illinois lumber on the **national and international stage** at trade shows, focusing on in-demand species like red oak and walnut.
- There is a need for **outreach to younger generations** about logging and milling as a profession, possibly by highlighting the use of new technology and working "smarter, not harder."

- The **Illinois Finance Authority's "Advantage Illinois" loan program** was suggested as a resource for loggers and millers struggling with equipment financing.
 - The Division continues to work to **increase cooperation between law enforcement and forestry** to enforce the Timber Buyer Licensing Act and the new Timber Transportation Act.
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Agenda Item: New/Old Business

- **State Forest Action Plan (SFAP) Suggestions:** The current SFAP must be reviewed and possibly revised by January of next year. Updates are already underway for the Forest Legacy Assessment of Need, the Urban and Community Forestry strategic plan (2025-2030), and a new Forest Health highlight section. Council members are encouraged to review the current plan and provide suggestions for minor tweaks, particularly concerning how the action items can better connect to the IFDC's on-the-ground grants.
- **Shawnee National Forest Update (Felipe Cano and Justin Dodson):**
 - The forest is currently dealing with litigation over a 70-acre timber sale. They are awaiting a decision on a preliminary injunction, which would determine if a temporary restraining order is lifted or made permanent.
 - The USDA reorganization may lead to a reduced regional office and increased emphasis on work being done at the forest unit level to meet the President's executive order on timber production and rural development.
 - An **Emergency Area Determination** has been expanded to most of the Shawnee to address forest health concerns.
 - A **Good Neighbor Authority** agreement with Pope County is being finalized to manage the large portion of the National Forest that lies within the county.
 - Shawnee is seeing an uptick in harvesting operations with interest from both northern and southern timber markets.
 - The Forest Service does not pay property taxes but sends **25% of timber receipts** back to the counties in which they were produced via the Secure Rural Schools Act (Payment in Lieu of Taxes).
- **NRCS Update (Wade Conn and George Henshaw):** The biggest focus is continuing the cooperative agreement with IDNR to support their field offices in certifying forest management practices for funding through programs like EQIP and CSP.
- **Illinois Arborist Association (Joe Hansen):** Registration is open for the annual conference in mid-November.

- **Illinois Department of Agriculture (Scott Schirmer):**
 - The **Spongy Moth program** continues to struggle with federal funding and a lack of a national program leader. Spongy Moth is not on the National Invasive Species Council's priority pest list, which may be impacting support. Decreased budgets have reduced the treated area from 400,000 acres to under 200,000, making it harder to slow the spread.
 - **Spotted Lanternfly** is still only found in the known infested area (southern Cook County) and is not yet proven to be a major forest pest.
 - **Elm Zigzag Sawfly (EZS)** numbers are mysteriously down this year after a large outbreak last year. Not sure, and looking into why.
- **Illinois Forestry Association (Tricia Bethke):** The annual conference is next week, with a field day at the Lovett property and another at the Palisades Nature Preserve. A harvest was recently completed on the Garish property to implement the forest management plan.
- **Society of American Foresters (Jennifer Lesko):** SAF will have a quick business meeting and elections next Friday, piggybacking with the IFA meeting.

Motion to Adjourn: Motion carries.