

Developing a Program to Certify Urban Foresters in California

Background

Providing a myriad of benefits, trees in urban areas are very important assets worth investing in and worth protecting. A coordinated urban forestry program is the way to create, fund and protect these valuable resources.

Although the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) certifies individuals as knowledgeable about and capable of professionally caring for trees, their Certified Arborist, Certified Arborist/Utility Specialist, and Certified Tree Worker programs deal primarily with individual trees. Urban forestry involves the selection, planting, maintenance, protection, preservation and management of all of the trees and landscapes in an urbanized area through a well-planned, coordinated program. This program will have to involve a partnership amongst government, business, non-profit organizations, and the public.

Today's urban forestry professional not only must demonstrate expertise in dealing with trees and their interactions with their environment, in a way that surpasses many arborists, but also must have knowledge about many other types of urban flora and their interactions with each other. Additionally, urban foresters must be conversant in zoning and building regulations and the process for amending, changing and appealing them. They also must have an understanding of architecture, engineering, and especially landscape architecture in order to interact with the professionals involved in most types of development. Awareness of wildfire impacts and water requirements in areas is essential. And this knowledge must be utilized in a manner that is respectful of both private property and the public process. Consequently, their communications skills, relations with the public, and political know-how must be finely honed to achieve the best, well-balanced outcome both for people and the planted environment.

While the need to hire urban forestry professionals depends on the size of a community and the availability of funds, the cost for the expertise they provide is usually recovered exponentially, even in the smallest communities. For years, Modesto, CA has proven that for every \$1 spent on urban forestry, the community and its citizens receive \$3 worth of value. That is a 200% per year return on investment. Conversely, many urban improvement investments are squandered because of a lack of specialized knowledge concerning selection, installation, maintenance or management of urban trees and landscapes.

In recent years, many public agencies, as well as numerous universities, companies, non-profits, and other organizations, have embarked on a search. They have recognized the increasingly urgent need for some mechanism to identify certified arborists also qualified and experienced in the myriad of other disciplines requisite to being an urban forestry professional. Recently, zoning

requirements imposed on real estate developers and management firms redoubled this demand.

In California alone, there are numerous federal and state agencies that deal with forestry, fire protection, and environmental protection, as well as other urban-forestry issues. There are 58 counties, many of which have programs to protect and manage vast areas of suburban or semi-wild vegetation and forests. California has over 475 chartered cities in addition to the hundreds of unchartered towns and communities. Over 1,100 public school districts comprise tens of thousands of schools and state-supported universities. The number of public agencies that already employ or believe they need urban forestry professionals reveals that in California alone there is a need for several thousand urban forestry professionals. When private sector companies and organizations are added, the need may approach 10,000 urban forestry professionals.

A number of colleges and universities have begun trying to define the knowledge and skills set that comprise the core competencies necessary to be a 21st century urban forester; some even have begun offering a variety of courses designed to introduce these concepts to arborists who already work in or desire a career in urban forestry. The problem is that there is no single, clear statement of the core competencies for an urban forestry professional, and no organized program to certify the quality of education and experience people are receiving.

Because government licensing generally is limited to protecting the health, physical and financial security of individual consumers, the appropriate mechanism for recognizing people who meet the specific professional qualifications for an urban forestry professional is certification.

Who should certify urban forestry professionals?

The most logical level for a certification program is statewide. Because vegetation and laws vary significantly across the country, all of the national, vegetation management-related organizations contacted by CaUFC concur that right now a federal or even regional program would not be appropriate.

Within California, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) focuses primarily on forest management and fire protection on state land and non-urbanized areas. California ReLeaf focuses on assisting numerous nonprofit tree-planting groups. The International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) programs deal primarily with the care of individual trees, rather than with the systems and/or ecosystem approach required in urban forestry. When contacted by CaUFC, representatives of ISA stated that they did not want to operate a

professional level certification program for urban foresters that would encompass the disciplines and areas of expertise needed for such a program. Similar responses were received from the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Society of American Foresters, American Forests, and several other national as well as state-level organizations that might potentially have been interested.

The California Urban Forests Council (CaUFC) is the logical organization to provide this certification. CaUFC began in 1968 as America's first urban forests council. CaUFC's mission is to promote an ecosystem approach to the practice of urban forestry by disseminating the research, experience and knowledge of a wide range of disciplines to those responsible for the management of urban forests. A holistic view of urban and community forestry embraces both people and natural systems as integral parts of every urban forest. A holistic view spans a continuum of urban and community forestry-related issues from inner city greening to wildfire and pest programs in rural-interface areas. This approach also reflects urban forests' values and benefits to urban air quality, storm water runoff, wildlife and fish habitats, and other related, ecosystem concerns.

Through its many educational programs, networking, and advocacy, CaUFC has been a leader in promoting the sound management of California's urban forests. Developing and certifying Urban Foresters in California is another step in insuring the continued professional management of this valuable resource.