

Volunteer Fire Assistance Grant Match Revised Phase 2 Grant Program

Background:

Funding for the Volunteer Fire District Assistance (VFA) Phase II Grant Program is provided by the US Forest Service (USFS) to the Department of Natural Resources through the Consolidated Payment Grant (CPG). The intent is for the Department to disburse and manage this funding through VFA grants to small rural fire districts to enhance their wildland firefighting capabilities. Traditionally, the Phase II Grant is structured as a reimbursable 50% award with a required 50% minimum grant match of total project cost. The 50% minimum grant match is a requirement of the Federal funding, that the Department then passes to the applicant. The maximum grant award amount is \$12,000. The Phase II Grant cycle typically accepts applications from eligible Fire Districts from Oct. 15-Dec. 15, with awards issued the following spring.

Deliverable(s):

With use of the HB 1168 \$600,000 VFA Match allocation, the Department has the ability to increase the maximum award amount, significantly reduce the grant match percentage Fire Districts must commit, and leverage Federal funding to increase the number of projects that can be awarded. It is our hope that these changes will result in providing more assistance to the Fire Districts who need it most.

It is proposed that the following revised grant award structure be considered:

Overall Phase II Grant Budget:

- \$600,000 DNR 1168 funding
- \$300,000 VFA Federal funding (projected allocation for the 2022 grant cycle, provided by the 2021 CPG)
- \$100,000 Fire District cost match

Per project:

- \$12,000 DNR 1168 funding (max. award); or 60% total project
- \$6,000 VFA Federal funding (max. award); or 30% total project
- \$2,000 Fire District (cost match); or 10% total project

With this revised grant award structure, Fire Districts can apply for a maximum grant award of \$18,000, which would only require a \$2,000 match commitment. The grant percentage structure would change from 50% awarded/50% matched to 90% awarded/10% matched. For many of our small, rural Fire District partners, the 50% project match requirement is a barrier to accessing the maximum grant award amount. They often lack the funding within their operating budget to meet that requirement. Many of them only apply for smaller dollar projects, if they are able to apply at all. By lowering the applicant project match requirement, we aim to see an increase in applications that would fill the unmet needs of these Districts.

Additionally, VFA money would go twice as far, allowing more projects to be funded. For example, if awarding \$300,000 Federal funding alone, 25 grant projects could be awarded if each requested the maximum of \$12,000. In combination with the 1168 funding, 50 grant projects could be awarded if each requested the maximum of \$18,000, using the same amount in Federal funding toward the grant program.

Reducing the applicant's grant match requirement by 40%, increasing the maximum award amount by 50%, and extending the reach of this grant program to potentially fund twice as many projects are all efforts in direct alignment with the goals, strategies, and priorities outlined in the Department's Wildland Fire Protection 10-Year Strategic Plan.

Goal #1 of the Plan is that *WA preparedness, response and recovery systems are fully capable, integrated, and sustainable*. Strategy #3 for meeting this goal is to *enhance and sustain a highly capable workforce*. The revision to the Phase II funding structure as described works to increase the capacity of the state's wildland fire response workforce (Strategy 3.3), and to create a pathway to better use the existing wildland fire workforce (Strategy 3.4). By better equipping and reaching more of the local rural Fire Districts, this funding will support faster, more effective initial attack maximizing the use of existing resources. Additionally, when Fire Districts have equipment and communications they need to perform duties as assigned, they are able to more seamlessly integrate into incident management (Strategy 3.4, Solution B).

Goal #4 of the Plan is that *response is safe and effective*. Strategy #9 for meeting this goal is to *establish effective wildland fire protection for all lands*. This strategy specifically describes local Fire Districts as one of the resources deployed to suppress fires when they occur. They may be the only available resource in under-protected landscapes. Often times, these Districts are also under-resourced or underfunded. An identified solution to these challenges is to provide assistance to ensure safe and effective response and address resource constraints. The revision to the Phase II funding structure as described works to increase Fire District access to the proper vehicles, tools, equipment, communications and PPE needed to meet the specific challenges of wildland firefighting. This is done by decreasing the financial commitment required of the Fire District while increasing the project award amount, allowing for the purchase of needed, often expensive items at a very low cost to the District. The intent of which is to increase the efficiency, effectiveness, and safety of the firefighters in the field (Strategy 10.4, Solution C). This in turn enhances Fire District's ability to safely perform initial attack and increases their efficiency during suppression efforts.

The anticipated downstream outcomes of how the revised Phase II funding structure meets these goals are reduced wildfire suppression costs and risk and loss mitigation for the local communities. These intended results serve to support the Strategic Plan's Vision: *All Washington- safely managing and living with wildland fire*.

An additional benefit to the revised grant award structure is that the Federal share of equipment purchases made with the Phase II grant will be reduced from a potential 50% share to 30% share in the total equipment fair market value, in the event that the Fire District decides

to dispose of the equipment while the value is greater than or equal to \$5,000. (Federal share is dependent upon total project cost. These percentages are derived assuming the total project is \$20,000, and the Fire District only contributes the 10% minimum required match.)

Grant awards would be implemented to award the DNR 1168 share (60% of total project, max. \$12,000) to the Fire District upon award notification. Fire Districts would then have a year to complete the project. Upon completion, Fire Districts would then submit for reimbursement for the remaining awarded amount (30% of total project, max. \$6,000) with proof of their committed match (10% of total project).

Timeline, Milestones and Key Decision Points:

- **11/05/21**- Deputy's approval to move forward
- **11/05-08/21**- Communications Department to update Fire District Assistance webpage with information regarding new Phase II grant structure. This includes but is not limited to: closure of current Phase II grant application window, information about how HB 1168 funding is being used to supplement program, revised grant application, revised grant guidance document, new grant application window dates.
- **11/05-11/15/21**- additional outreach to Fire Districts regarding the changes to the grant and the new timelines (phone calls, region outreach, social media, etc.)
- **11/15/21-01/31/22**- revised grant application submission window. Slight extension of time over traditional length of time would allow Fire Districts some flexibility over the holidays, as it is assumed this would be a busy time of year for emergency services.
- **02/01-03/15/22**- grant application scoring. Once scoring is completed and awards are known, it is at this time that any 1168 funding left will be transferred over to supplement the Phase I grant process.
- **03/16-04/30/22**- grant award notification and DNR 1168 share (60% of total project) disbursement to Fire Districts.
- **06/30/23**- grant project closure and reimbursement request (submitted to DNR for reimbursement of remaining 30% of project award and proof of 10% match contribution) deadline.