



UFST Urban Forest Strike Team

Assessing Tree Damage After Disasters

Natural disasters cause significant damage each year to our urban forests, and the resulting assessment and cleanup responsibilities are a challenge for many communities. State Forestry Agencies and the U.S. Forest Service have been developing resources to provide assistance to communities after disasters. The Urban Forest Strike Team (UFST) initiative was developed by the States and U.S. Forest Service in the eastern U.S. and involves recruiting, training and deploying professional Urban Foresters and Arborists (required to have specific certification and experience) to assess urban tree storm damage using arboriculture and FEMA standards. The goals of UFST assessments are to assist communities in need, provide increased public safety, reduce loss of the urban tree canopy, document disaster recovery needs and costs for possible FEMA reimbursement, and provide for more efficient recovery.

UFST assessments can be done soon after the disaster, during the recovery phase. The State Urban Forestry Coordinator or UFST Team Leader can work with municipal staff to assess the need and plan for an UFST assessment. A good fit for an UFST assessment is a disaster situation where there is significant damage to public trees, and the community finds it challenging to determine what trees need removal or pruning. The community should have the capacity to follow up on the UFST recommendations.

UFST deployments can be flexible based on the community's needs. Teams comprise up to 12 people and include a Team Leader and GIS support. Two person crews generally work along street right of ways and on public property to identify trees that pose a high risk to the public, and the crew recommends tree removal and treatment needs. Mobile devices are used to record data and tree locations. Summary reports and maps can be provided to the community to help them plan the work needed and document the cost of damage (for FEMA or other funding). The UFST crews can help with other optional tasks such as marking trees for removal/pruning, estimating ground debris, and identifying reforestation needs.

The Massachusetts Tree Wardens and Foresters Association (MTWFA), through a grant from the U.S. Forest Service, is working with an advisory committee and the State Urban Forestry Program Coordinators to train volunteers and deploy crews. In the northeast and Midwest states over 275 people have gone through the basic Task Specialist training - 22 of those have attended a more advanced Team Leader training. The Southern states have over 170 Task Specialists and 36 Team Leaders. Training sessions are usually offered twice a year. Since 2007 UFST Teams have conducted four assessments after disasters in northeast states and 11 assessments in southeast states.