

Sourcing Firewood from Actively Managed National Forests and Alternatives

There are various ways firewood banks can source wood, and we aim to highlight and build upon numerous successful models.

1. Commercial Loggers

The most common model is purchasing low-grade logs from a logger with a federal timber permit. Loggers often seek opportunities to offload low-grade wood for a small profit—pulp mills typically offer the lowest price per ton. Once permitted, loggers can harvest wood from the designated area until reaching the maximum allowable volume or the end of the calendar year, depending on the forest's management goals. Logging practices such as clear-cutting or thinning may occur, each with specific management objectives.

In some cases, non-dimensional wood is left over after a commercial timber harvest. Some loggers sort logs at a landing away from where they are harvested. Working with commercial loggers to recycle the small-diameter logs and branches that remain after a harvest can result in many cords of firewood.

Barriers: Federal timber permits are expensive and often unjustifiable for those harvesting only firewood-grade logs. Permitted areas may be remote or inaccessible, requiring significant investment in road construction. Environmental assessments—while essential for sustainable forest management—can delay timber sale availability.

2. National Forest Firewood Permits (Personal Use & Commercial Use)

National Forests offer personal-use firewood permits, allowing individuals to harvest smaller loads of wood, averaging about \$5/cord, for personal home heating. Forest supervisors set cord limits, and regulations vary by forest. Typically, only dead and downed trees—or dead standing trees—may be harvested. Species, size, and location restrictions may apply. To prevent the spread of pests, harvested wood should not be transported more than 50 miles from the source.

Commercial timber permits are also attainable through the Forest Service at varying scales. Commercial permits as small as 1-2 acres can be worked out with your District Forest Supervisor at the price of \$5/cord. These permits allow for the self-harvest of logs and allow for public use or sale of the wood once harvested.

Permittees must follow rules regarding motorized access, [Wild and Scenic River](#) and other important designations, critical habitat exempt from firewood removal, and seasonal restrictions on combustion engine use based on fire restrictions or wilderness area boundaries must be followed.

Barriers: This method is labor-intensive and requires safety training, experience, physical ability, and access to appropriate tools and vehicles.

3. Tribal Agreements

[Tribal Free Use Permit](#), Ceremonial Wood Permits, and Traditional Use Wood Permits are available to tribes from the U.S. Forest Service. These identify a specific location and provisions for thinning and

removal of low-grade wood, green wood, or wood stockpiled through forest management practices. Depending on the type of permit, the wood can be used for tribal firewood programs to ensure community heating needs are met, ceremonial use, or to sustain traditional indigenous cooking and lifestyle practices that use wood heat.

Tribes may appoint an official representative to harvest, load, and haul wood under the terms established by the forest supervisor. These permits often include cord limits, mapped harvest areas, and clear expectations for communication and tracking.

Barriers: These agreements are developed individually by district forest supervisors and require a relationship with forest managers to acquire. They are tied to the forest's active management plan; therefore, wood piles may be difficult to utilize due to log size or condition. Specialized equipment for loading and hauling may be necessary, and access to such equipment can be limited or costly for some tribes.

4. Land Stewardship Agreements and Contracts

Collaboration under [stewardship agreements](#) can include fuels treatment, pre-commercial thinning, habitat restoration, and fireline construction. Low-grade wood resulting from these activities may be given to or sold to firewood banks. Conservation agencies, fire departments, youth corps, and/or local community action groups are eligible to hold an agreement. A project can be proposed to local forest supervisors who will decide what type of agreement works best with the proposed project. These agreements often align with State Forest Action Plans.

Barriers: These agreements are relatively rare due to the complexity of collaboration and research required. While the goals—such as hazardous fuel reduction or habitat restoration—are often clearly defined, the logistics of implementation are left to the agreement holder. Small operations or independent loggers may struggle with the scale, resources, or timeline required.

5. Hazardous Fuel Reduction Projects

Accelerated removal of hazardous fuels in National Forests is a growing priority, especially for forests that have not included fire in their management strategy for the last 100+ years. The buildup of dead and fallen trees increases the likelihood of high-intensity fires that grow out of control. This puts people and private property at risk. Consider proposing a project to your local forest management that removes firewood (also known as fuel wood), defines fuel breaks, or promotes defensible space around private property. These projects help mitigate risk in timbered areas, especially in areas where forestry crews are limited or understaffed.

Projects should be collaborative and include county government, fire departments, and state and federal agencies. Types of projects include: Cut Skid and Deck Contracts and Small Hand Thinning Projects.

Barriers: Fuel reduction projects must be done outside of the peak wildfire season, which has no fixed beginning or end date. Climate and weather patterns determine the severity of fire season, which is why these projects are best completed preventively, ahead of fire season. Removing wood from fuel-dense areas is labor-intensive and requires access roads and equipment to haul wood outside of the forest.

6. Recreational Partnerships

Special Use Permits issued by the Forest Service allow commercial operators—such as ski resorts, lodges, outfitters, and campgrounds—to operate on federal lands. These lessees manage their areas with forest manager approval. Weather events, development plans, or safety concerns often require tree removal. Windstorms, expansion projects, or fallen trees across roads and trails can generate significant volumes of usable wood. When feasible, this wood can be offered to nearby towns or firewood banks for heating purposes.

7. Utility Partnerships

Utility companies and highway departments frequently clear trees along roadsides and under power lines to maintain visibility and reduce risk. Overgrown trees can obstruct emergency vehicles or [cause fatal accidents](#). Additionally, trees contacting power lines pose fire and electrical hazards, particularly in fire-prone areas.

Wood removed through these maintenance activities can be seasoned and used as firewood. Firewood banks can partner with utility companies, the Forest Service, and highway departments to give this wood a second life. These partnerships also support consistent maintenance by providing a destination for the removed wood and assistance with hauling.

8. Urban Wood Recycling

Urban tree removal is a common occurrence; the essential maintenance creates branches and full tree trunks that could be used as firewood. Planning with local arborists to take wood out of their hands is helpful and resourceful. All wood is valuable!

Programs like [Chip Drop](#) help arborists connect with gardeners and local firewood users when wood becomes available. Once registered for the service, you can select full logs (instead of wood chips) as your preference and specify where you'd like the logs delivered.

Helpful Resources

Visualizing the Extent of Ongoing Forestry Projects

[Montana DNRC Interactive Map](#)

[Mechanical and Hand Fuels Reduction in California](#) from the California Wildfire Taskforce

[Hazardous Fuels Treatment](#) Map from the US Forest Service

These maps were developed to track forestry projects around individual states and nationwide. They may inspire partnerships or ideas for future projects.

Wood Bank Success Stories

- ❖ The National Forest Foundation's Wood for Life initiative helps tribes access firewood for traditional, ceremonial, and heating purposes from a range of sources as it becomes available. Through grants and partnerships, Wood for Life helps offset the cost of removing non-dimensional or non-marketable wood from the forests and gives it a second life. The coordination is completed by the National Forest Foundation staff and Wood for Life partners, in addition to the USDA Forest Service.

This initiative originated in Arizona and has expanded into New Mexico, Idaho, Nevada, Colorado, South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming. Dozens of tribes and tribal chapters benefit from the initiative.

- ❖ The Rocky Mountain Youth Corps in New Mexico trains young people to reduce hazardous fuels in National Forests through a seldom-used Forest Service Contract - [Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program](#). Fuels such as pine, ponderosa, piñon, and juniper are harvested, processed, and distributed as firewood to their community. These projects promote healthy forest management and reduce dead and fallen fuels and ladder fuels, following prescriptions developed by the Forest Service's silviculturist.
- ❖ A [Master Stewardship Agreement](#) was developed in Lincoln County, Montana, that supports wildfire risk reduction throughout the Kootenai National Forest and the wildland-urban interface. The agreement allows for wood removal from the forest for a specified number of years in an effort to reduce community risk.

Conservation or Implementation Partners

- National Forest Foundation
- The Nature Conservancy
- Conservation Legacy
- Ancestral Lands Corps
- National Wild Turkey Federation