

State of Montana
Department of Natural Resources and
Conservation
Fire Protection Bureau



Volunteer Fire Capacity Grant
Guide

Grant Year 2024-2025

Federal Grant Dollars from the USDA Forest Service Available
to Improve Fire Protection Capabilities in Unprotected or
Inadequately Protected Areas.

INTRODUCTION

This procedural guide addresses procedures for the Volunteer Fire Capacity Grant (VFC) Grant Program and includes information for the use of grant funds.

Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service which makes funding available to rural fire departments. This federal funding is passed through and administered by the Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC).

VFC GRANT PROGRAM PURPOSE

The Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC), with assistance from the USDA Forest Service, administers the Volunteer Fire Capacity (VFC) Grant Program. This Program is authorized by the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1990, (Farm Bill) and provides financial, technical, and related assistance to volunteer fire departments to organize, train and equip local firefighters. Assist qualifying fire departments in saving lives and protecting financial investments and enhance environmental quality to revitalize rural areas and communities of 10,000 persons or less.

ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS

- A rural fire department which is defined as "an organized, not for profit, fire protection organization that provides service primarily to a community or city with a population of 10,000 or less to a rural area, as defined by the Secretary of Agriculture, whose firefighting personnel is 80 percent or more volunteer, and that is recognized as a fire department by the laws of the State. 16 U.S.C. 2106.
- Department Firefighting Personnel is 80% or more volunteer.
- Area fire departments (fire districts, townships, etc.) may serve an aggregate population of greater than 10,000 if the service area of the fire department includes a rural area or rural community having a population of 10,000 or less. The VFC funding must be used to benefit the rural population.
- A single county or town with a population of over 10,000 that is served by two or more fire districts operating entirely within the bounds of the county or town may qualify if the service area of a given fire department includes a rural area or rural community or the population of the fire department's jurisdiction is 10,000 or less. The VFC funding must be used for the rural area.
- A single community with a population greater than 10,000 and having a single fire department with one or more fire stations may qualify. The fire department must have a service area that includes a rural area or community that does not exceed 10,000 populations. The VFC funding must be used only for the benefit of the rural population. Similarly, a single community with a population greater than 10,000 that also provides fire protection to an adjoining rural community of 10,000 or less population by contract may also be eligible provided the VFC funding is used entirely to support the rural community.
- A single community fire department serving a population greater than 10,000 and not providing protection to a rural area or to a rural community is not eligible for VFC financial assistance.

AVAILABLE FUNDING

- Funds originate from the USDA Forest Service and are awarded and administered by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

ELIGIBLE COSTS AND COMPLIANCE WITH LAWS AND REGULATIONS

- Subrecipients of federal grant funds must comply with the Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (Uniform Guidance) published by the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

- The Uniform Guidance is consolidated in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Title 2, Part 200, Subparts A through F and appendices. These regulations, referred to collectively as “2 CFR 200,” are regularly referenced in this document. They can be viewed at <https://www.ecfr.gov/> by selecting “Title 2 – Grants and Agreements”.

ADDITIONAL REGULATIONS GOVERNING DNRC SUBAWARDS INCLUDE, BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO:

- Federal, state, and local laws, statutes, rules, and ordinances, as applicable.
- The federal award—the signed agreement between DNRC and the federal agency providing funds. Terms and conditions of the federal award that are applicable to subrecipients are incorporated into the Subaward Agreement.
- The Subaward Agreement—a signed agreement that documents the legal relationship between DNRC and the subrecipient and describes each party’s roles and responsibilities; and
- Other federal, or state program requirements. These are communicated to the subrecipient through subaward-related materials such as the request for proposal, application, and Subaward Agreement, or via relevant agency websites and publications.

INSURANCE REQUIREMENTS

- Subrecipients must purchase and maintain liability insurance coverage equal to or exceeding the limits required in the Subaward Agreement. Prior to applying for subaward funds, applicants can contact the designated DNRC Program Representative for information about insurance requirements. Documentation required by DNRC to verify insurance depends on the type of entity:
 - Cities, towns, counties or organizations covered under either the Montana Municipal Interlocal Authority (MMIA) or Montana Association of Counties (MACo) have coverage verified by DNRC.
 - (2) Entities covered under private insurance companies must submit the following documentation to DNRC before a Subaward Agreement can be executed:
- A current Certificate of Liability Insurance specific to the award that (a) includes the types and maximum coverage for the insurance, (b) names the State of Montana as an additional insured and as the certificate holder, and (c) lists the DNRC Subaward Agreement Number on the face of the certificate.
- Endorsement, as required, to document the naming of the State of Montana as an additional insured. The address to use on the endorsement is: State of Montana. ATTN: DNRC Forestry Division, 2705 Spurgin Road, Missoula, MT 59804; or documentation of policy provisions covering Blanket Additional Insureds.

SAM REGISTRATION

- Recipients are required to register with the federal government System for Award Management (SAM) at <https://sam.gov/content/home> prior to receiving an award. You will need a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI), Taxpayer ID Number (TIN), and financial information to set up Electronic Funds Transfer.

COST-SHARE / MATCHING REQUIREMENTS

- The VFC program requires award grantees of federal award monies to provide either matching dollars or in-kind match. At the time a request for reimbursement is submitted, the match will be identified as cash match (deducted from the total of invoices) or in-kind match.

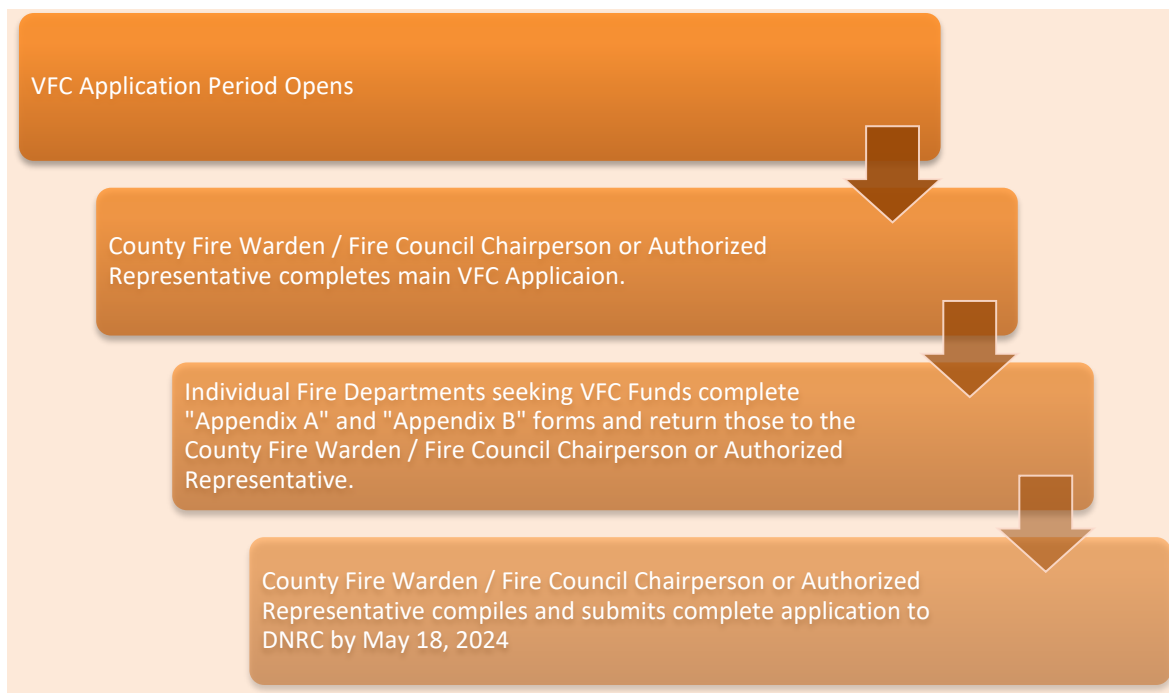
- The applicant must match a minimum of 10% (90% VFC) of the total cost of the project from sources other than the federal government. Matching expenditures may take several forms, which include:
 - Cash Match: Funds from the fire department budget or donated by the community or other outside non-federal sources spent to purchase items included on the award request and documented on the invoice. (Funds originating from federal sources cannot be used as match)
- In-Kind expenses: Volunteer hours for work done on the project items (like installing a pump or attending a training session), donated space for holding a training session and donated labor from a vendor providing one of the items purchased under the award. Documentation needs to be provided for in-kind match, such as: Necessary costs incurred by another organization to support the VFC project. Contributed time for personnel and equipment: Donated labor and/or equipment necessary to complete the VFC project. Individuals must provide an invoice that shows business name and address stating time donated by dates and hours and activity performed. Volunteer in-kind hourly rate is \$27.87 per hour. All reimbursable and matching expenses must be fully documented before payment is made by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC).
- Excess matches, whether cash or in-kind, will not increase the amount of reimbursement above the original grant amount requested and awarded.
- Insufficient match will result in less than the awarded amount being reimbursed – and only if all other aspects of the project have been completed.

PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE

- The program’s primary intent is to support activities in preparation for the upcoming wildland fire season. Proposed projects should be ready for implementation upon award and should be substantially achievable by spring to summer of 2025. Grant funds are provided on a reimbursement basis after expenses are incurred, paid, and documented by the applicant organization. The maximum award period will be from July 1, 2024– May 1, 2025.

APPLICATION PROCESS AND DEADLINE

- Application materials can be found on the DNRC website at: <https://dnrc.mt.gov/Forestry/Grants/FireGrants/Volunteer-Fire-Capacity>, or by calling (406) 542-4267
- Applications can be submitted via Submittable or sent DNRC VFC Grant Program Manager at rheablankenship@mt.gov.
- All applications are due no later than **May 18, 2024**



REQUIREMENTS

- National Fire Incident Reporting (NFIRS) compliant by reporting ALL fire occurrences to NFIRS as required by Montana Law (ARM 23.12.402).
- National Incident Management System (NIMS) compliant.
- Insurance coverage. Provide a current Certificate of Liability Insurance.
- At the time of application for a VFC grant, the applicant must be registered in Systems for Award Management (SAM) and hold an **active registered** Unique Entity Identifier (UEI).
- Taxpayer/Federal Identification Number (TIN)/Employer Identification Number (EIN).
- Certification Regarding Debarment, Suspension, Ineligibility and Voluntary Exclusion - Lower Tier Covered Transactions, Form AD-1048.
 - Each Grantee must certify that no vendor or contractor debarred or suspended from being able to work under a federal grant, according to the terms of 2 CFR Part 180, has received any money under this grant project by signing the Certification Regarding Debarment, Suspension, Ineligibility and Voluntary Exclusion - Lower Tier Covered Transactions, Form AD-1048.
- Financial assistance on any project requires a **non-federal** match for project expenditures. The funding must be matched on a 10 percent basis (90% VFC-10% match).
- Purchase(s) must be made following receipt of the award letter. No purchase(s) may be made prior to the date listed on the VFC award letter will be eligible for cost-share assistance.

APPLICATION SUBMISSION:

Applications will be accepted in five project categories:

Wildland Training for Department Personnel

- Grant funding for the tuition and travel costs for RFD personnel to attend wildland fire training opportunities. This may include training through the state fire school, wildfire academies, community colleges, local intra- or inter-department training opportunities.

Examples of non-qualifying projects include:

- Emergency Medical Technician training and salary-related costs for trainees - such as backfill or overtime costs.)

Wildland Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- Wildland basic PPE, such as new generation fire shelters, fire resistant shirts and pants, hard hats, eye protectors, gloves, (Wildland Boots cannot be funded).

Wildland Equipment and Water Handling

- Grant funding may be available for fire line tools (Pulaski's, shovels, etc.) and water handling equipment (pumps, hoses, drop tanks, etc.).
 - (Examples of nonqualifying projects include:
 - Purchase of fire trucks or other capital equipment valued at over \$5,000 per unit, building or other construction, paramedic/EMT equipment, fire hydrant construction, land purchases, routine vehicle maintenance (tune-ups, tires, etc.), department identification patches, t-shirts, or promotional items.)

Radio Communications (P25 Compliant)

- Grant funding may be available for the purchase of P25 compliant radio equipment and accessories only. (See "Radio Equipment - P25 Compliance" information below).

Fire Department Organization and Planning

- Grant funding may be available for costs to form an organized fire district. Funds may also be available for planning costs to support risk assessments or hazard mitigation planning. (Examples of non-qualifying projects include Furniture, telephone, personnel, postage, uniforms, badges, stationery, or insurance costs.)

SELECTION PROCESS

- Funds are awarded through a competitive application process. Grant applications are received, reviewed, scored, and ranked by DNRC representatives. Countywide applications will receive priority consideration, with the exception of departments in counties without a countywide organization. In the case of departments in counties without a county fire association or rural fire council, countywide fire department, etc., your applications may be submitted through your County Fire Warden. Applications meeting the following conditions will receive priority consideration:
 - Complete and accurate application submission
 - National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) complaint.
 - Accurate/timely wildland fire occurrence reporting to the local DNRC office during the previous calendar year. (All reporting will be verified) Demonstrated need.
 - Community Wildland Fire Risk, based on the Montana Wildland Fire Risk Assessment
 - Number of Fire Department responses in 2023
 - Use(s) of funding
- Final recommendations and approval of awards will be made by the DNRC. Each applicant will be notified by mail or Email of the final status of their grant application. Additional information and instructions will be given to the selected applicants.

AWARD NOTIFICATION

Announcements are anticipated between July 1, 2024, and August 2024

- Applicants will be notified of funding recommendations after decisions are finalized. Upon grant award, formal agreements will be executed between the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) and each grantee organization.
- The Volunteer Fire Capacity Program Subaward Agreement, Agency name will match the name listed on your SAM.gov UEI# Entity Data Detailed Results.
- DNRC utilizes the DocuSign electronic signature service for agreement execution. The Authorized Representative will receive any agreement for signature at the email address provided.
- The Authorized Representative is the person who has legal authority to enter into an agreement with DNRC and will sign any agreement documents.

OTHER INFORMATION

REIMBURSEMENT REQUESTS

- No funds will be reimbursed for expenses incurred prior to execution of a formal written agreement between (DNRC) and the applicant organization.
- Purchases must match your application request (Appendix A), otherwise your department will not be reimbursed.
- Requests for reimbursement must be received by May 1, 2025. Extensions will not be awarded, and award dollars cannot roll forward. Unspent dollars will be reallocated.

REIMBURSEMENT INSTRUCTIONS

- **The VFC award is administered as a reimbursement award.** Once the project is completed, the award grantee must provide proper documentation to support a reimbursement request which includes copies of invoices, (quotes and/or statements are not acceptable) town warrants and/or copy of canceled checks front and back, copy of credit card/bank statement as evidence that approved items have been purchased and paid for. **Statements/Invoices from vendors stamped “paid” or “amount due \$0.00 are not acceptable as proof of payment.** Proper documentation to support in-kind match must include an individual’s name, dates, hours, and activity. This can include training/meeting rosters and maintenance logs. A Vendor Invoice must also be completed with information required for payment.
- The fire department must have a federal tax identification number (TIN)/ employer identification number (EIN), as well as a registered Unique Entity Identifier (UEI).

MODIFICATION/AMENDMENT

- **Prior approval from the VFC Program Officer is needed for purchase of items OTHER THAN those listed on the application. Request must include:**
 - o Why you don’t want to purchase the allowable items in original application.
 - o What specific items to be purchased; and
 - o What are the advantages to your department; and
 - o Why that/those item(s) were not included on the original application list.

PROCUREMENT REQUIREMENTS

- All procurement activities shall be in compliance with Uniform Administrative Requirements applicable to the sub-grantee organization. For State and Local Governments and other organizations this includes requirements contained in Code of Federal Regulations 2CFR200. All Sub-grantees are responsible for developing, documenting, and adhering to their own established

procurement activities that include both administrative and accounting controls. Costs for some commonly purchased items will be limited. See the VFC Grant Funding Limitations on the following page.

CAPITAL EQUIPMENT PURCHASES

- Due to the USDA Forest Service purchase requirements and five-year monitoring process, equipment, or supply purchases with a unit value of \$5,000 or more **cannot** be funded, or partially funded, under this grant program.

MAINTENANCE REQUIREMENTS

- VFC grant funds are intended to support ongoing fire department response capabilities across Montana - and the expectation is that items funded under this program will remain in use for their normal serviceable lifetime. Normal maintenance is the responsibility of the local fire department/district.

RADIO EQUIPMENT – P25 COMPLIANCE – USDA Forest Service VFC Grant Requirement

- The primary purpose of radio funding is to assist departments with two-way radio communications which will meet the EIA/TIA 102A standards for interoperability for public safety agencies (APCO Project 25 Compliant) and specifically will be used to communicate with Montana DNRC State Forestry and other Federal, State and Local Firefighting agencies on wildland/urban interface fires.
- Two-way radio communication equipment purchased must meet or exceed the APCO Project 25 Standards (EIA/TIA102A). Radio equipment will need to operate in the VHF Spectrum of 136Mhz. to 174Mhz. and be fully P25 compliant. Local two-way radio communications dealers and distributors can assist with information about manufacturers that currently produce P25 compliant two-way radio equipment and or radio equipment that meets this requirement.

TRAVEL EXPENDITURES

- Reimbursement of all travel expenditures for training or other purposes must be consistent with state written travel policies. <https://doa.mt.gov/employee-travel>

QUESTIONS:

Questions about the application process or VFC program guide may be directed to:

Rhea Blankenship
VFC/VFA Grant Program
2705 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
rheablankenship@mt.gov
406-542-4267

ALLOWABLE AND UNALLOWABLE COST		
COST ITEMS	YES	NO
Fire Department Organization and Planning. Formation of a NEW rural or volunteer fire district.	YES	
Wildland firefighting supplies such as basic tools, fireline hand tools, hose, adapters/reducers, fittings, valves, pumps, nozzles, fold-a-tanks, portable tanks, chainsaws, hydrant wrenches, kestrels, drip touches, flares (fuses), and weather kits.	YES	
Wildland training expenses, such as instructor fees, travel expenses, tuition costs, classroom materials for either basic or advanced courses.	YES	
Pumps or slip-on units for apparatus new, refurbished or repairs. Portable pumps and accessories, dip tanks. Chainsaws and basic accessories.	YES	
Wildland basic PPE, such as new generation fire shelters, fire resistant shirts and pants, coveralls, hard hats, eye protectors, gloves. Needs to be NFPA 1977 Compliant. Fireline pack/belt assembly.	YES	
Wildland communications equipment, such as narrow-band or narrow-band compatible handheld or vehicle units, pagers and accessories and Global Position Units (GPS). All communications equipment must be P25 compliant. Base stations, charging bases, extra batteries, installation hardware as needed.	YES	
Freight or shipping costs for allowable items	YES	
Fire Prevention materials.		NO
Acquisition of land.		NO
Construction or remodeling of buildings or any work on “real” property (such as wells).		NO
Emergency <u>medical</u> equipment, rescue equipment or extraction equipment, tow ropes and first aid kits. VFC funds are for fire use only.		NO
Structural firefighting accessories or equipment. SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus) systems.		NO
Boots, socks, thermal underwear, rain suits, rain jackets, and structural turnout gear. Custom-made packs, personal gear bags, sleeping bags.		NO
Generators, ATVs or UTV’s type utility vehicles, trailers, water rescue equipment, routine maintenance of fire equipment, such as tires, batteries, tune-ups.		NO
Personnel wages (as in employees on a payroll) will only be funded if they relate to “instructor fees” for training project activities. These award dollars are not intended to pay for wages, salaries, stipends, or other volunteer/employee payments unless it relates to being an instructor.		NO
“Walkie- talkies”, two-way radios and cell phones, Unmanned Aerial Systems		NO
Due to the USDA Forest Service purchase requirements and five-year monitoring process. Requests for single item of equipment with a value equal to or greater than \$5,000.		NO
Office equipment, mobile phones, drones, computers, software, smoke detectors, TVs, DVD players, cameras, VCRs, or projectors. GPS accessories (additional software, carrying cases, etc.).		NO
Logo wear and logo items (t-shirts, sweatshirts, jackets, pens, flashlights etc. printed with a fire department’s logo)		NO