

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



Volunteer Fire Capacity Grant
Guide

Grant Year 2026-2027

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 and Conservation (DNRC), in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service, administers the Volunteer Fire Capacity (VFC) Grant Program. The VFC program was established to enhance the capacity and capability of fire departments serving rural areas and communities by providing funding for the purchase of wildland firefighting equipment and suppression supplies. These fire districts play a critical role in protecting rural communities and serve as key partners in the cooperative suppression of wildland fires.

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.
- 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 borders 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

- **Funding is conditional upon available allocations to this program.**
- 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 APPLICABLE LAWS AND REGULATIONS

- A Volunteer Fire Capacity grant is an award of Federal Financial Assistance and is subject to the OMB guidance in subparts A through F of 2 CFR Part 200 as adapted and supplemented by the USDA in 2 CFR Part 400. Adoption by USDA of the OMB guidance in 2 CFR 400 gives regulatory effect to the OMB guidance in 2 CFR 200 where full text may be found. Electronic copies of the CFRs can be obtained at the following internet site: www.ecfr.gov.
- Additional regulations governing administration of Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Awards include:
 - Federal, state, and local laws, statutes, rules, and ordinances as applicable.
 - Sub-award agreement – a signed agreement between Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the sub-recipient.
 - Applicable federal or state program requirements.

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 \$32.15 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.

Description	Documentation Examples & Description
Volunteer Hours Calculated at \$32.15/ hour	Membership, Fire Defense Board, or board meeting sign-in sheets that show the purpose of meetings, date of meetings, length of time and a list of names.
	Training roster sheet that shows: type of training, name of instructor, date, length of time, list of names.
	Log showing a person’s name, date and time worked and activities performed. (Do not use if individual’s occupation is a mechanic; use professional time).

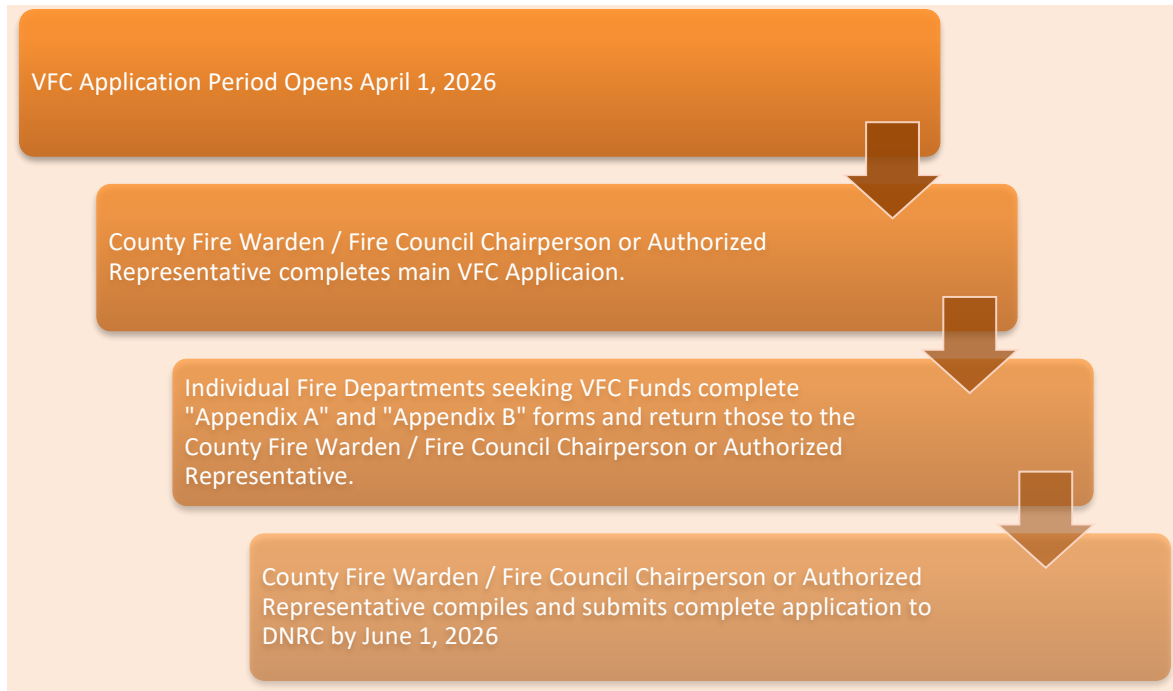
Donated Supplies	A receipt showing item, cost, date, and signature of person making the donation. A donation receipt from the LOCAL FIRE AGENCY would be best.
Donated Professional Time (mechanic, attorney, physician, etc.)	Individual must provide an invoice that shows business name and address stating time donated by dates and hours and activity performed. In addition, state the occupational hourly/daily rate for services provided. <u>Reduced rates area also acceptable as both match and expense.</u>
Donated Use Time (meeting hall, mechanic shop, etc.)	Individual must provide an invoice that shows business name and address stating time donated by dates and hours and activity performed. In addition, state the occupational hourly/daily rate for services provided.
Mileage	Mileage will be reimbursed according to the State of Montana rates for the corresponding time-frame. Proper documentation includes miles driven, destination, purpose, and driver. 2026 mileage rates are \$0.349 per mile for vehicles.
Unallowable Match	Response to actual fire dispatches, hazard mitigation activities, medical dispatches, training associated with medical or extrication exercises.

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 2027. Grant funds are provided on a reimbursement basis after expenses are incurred, paid, and documented by the applicant organization.

APPLICATION PROCESS AND DEADLINE

- Application materials can be found on the DNRC website at: <https://dnrc.mt.gov/Forestry/Grants/FireGrants/Rural-Fire-Capacity>, or by calling (406) 542-4267
- Applications can be submitted via Submittable or sent DNRC VFC Grant Program at rheablankenship@mt.gov.
- All applications are due no later than **June 1, 2026**



REQUIREMENTS

- National Fire Incident Reporting (NFIRS) compliant by reporting ALL fire occurrences to NFIRS as required by Administrative Rule of Montana (ARM 23.12.402).
- National Incident Management System (NIMS) Compliance – NIMS training is required under Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD-5) to receive federal funding, contracts, grants, training, and reimbursement of disaster recovery funds. For details visit: http://fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nims/nims_training_program.pdf
- 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 200.214, 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% cost share).
- Purchase(s) must be made following the date of the last signature to the VFC grant agreement and ends on the agreement's expiration date. No purchase(s) may be made prior to the date of the last signature to the VFC grant agreement will be eligible for reimbursement.

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, and 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 non-qualifying projects include Purchase of fire trucks or other capital equipment valued at over \$9,999.99 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 2025
 - 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 August 2026 and September 2026

- 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 list 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 June 30, 2027. 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 Grantee 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 Federal Financial Assistance and is subject to the OMB guidance in subparts A through F of 2 CFR Part 200 as adapted and supplemented by the USDA in 2 CFR Part 400. Adoption by USDA of the OMB guidance in 2 CFR 400 gives regulatory effect to the OMB guidance in 2 CFR 200 where full text may be found. 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.

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 \$9,999.99 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. The policy must be specified and approved before a sub-grant agreement is executed.

VFC GRANT FUNDING LIMITATIONS

- The following list identifies wildland fire equipment and protective gear that are commonly requested for funding support. Fire departments will be reimbursed up to 90% of documented costs for approved items. Other limitations may be identified at the time of the award.
- All items must be identified in the original grant proposal (Appendix A of Application) and approved by DNRC. All expenses must be for items purchased and received during the term of the formal grant award.

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 new apparatus, 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 \$9,999.99		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