News
EarthBeat



Students plant trees in the West Greenville neighborhood of Greenville, South Carolina, for Community Tree Day on Nov. 10, 2022. (Courtesy of Flickr/RawPixel.com/Creative Commons)



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In the more than five years that Stillmeadow Community Fellowship in Baltimore has worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service to rehabilitate the 10-acre forest on its urban land, what stands out to the Rev. Michael Martin is kids' reactions to the "great things in (God's) original architecture of nature."

Children who are unfamiliar with nature may get the "heebie-jeebies" when they first walk through the church's walking trails by the stream and the pond, Martin, the Evangelical Free Church of America pastor, said. But after a few days of learning about their surroundings during summer camp or an after-school program, that nervousness changes so much that the adults have to coax them back inside for music classes.

But as a result of President Donald Trump's federal funding freeze, Stillmeadow's summer camps are now at risk as promised grant money isn't coming in. And, the urban forestry program that would have allowed others to experience Stillmeadow's land transformation is in jeopardy, Martin said.

Faith organizations are among those across the United States suffering funding losses amid the Trump administration's quest to dismantle former President Joe Biden's major climate law, the Inflation Reduction Act. On the first day of Trump's second, nonconsecutive term in the White House, he signed an executive order pausing the disbursal of funds that were appropriated through the 2022 law. And, despite a judge's order on Feb. 10 — which called the freeze "likely unconstitutional"

and directed the IRA funds to resume — grant recipients said funding remains paused.

The IRA majorly expanded the U.S. Forest Service's urban forestry program with a $1.5 billion investment to help city residents adapt to climate change. More than 300 faith organizations have lost access to grant funds intended to plant trees in disadvantaged urban communities, leaders who managed grants for numerous organizations told RNS. The vast majority of those grantees are congregations, as well as a few religious educational institutions and religious service organizations.

In addition to lowering urban temperatures, planting trees can clean the air of pollutants, capture carbon and reduce flooding by soaking up rainwater.

The urban forestry program specifically targeted disadvantaged communities as determined by the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool, which took into account environmental burdens, higher-education enrollment and formerly redlined census tracts before it was taken offline by the Trump administration.

" Tree plantings in the congregation, the hope was then that can reverberate out into the community, and so that their congregants would also want to increase tree canopy in their own yards," said Cassandra Carmichael, the executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, which was poised to work on tree planting across seven cities before the funding freeze. Carmichael said the organization has not yet been reimbursed for costs already incurred.

Faith in Place, an environmental nonprofit based in Chicago, had already announced subgrants to faith groups in Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana for urban tree planting. It planned to build on previous work using "nature-based climate solutions," but the Rev. Brian Sauder, a Mennonite pastor who serves as its president and CEO, told RNS its IRA-funded projects are on pause.

"It's unconscionable to us that trees are now a partisan political tool," he said.

The number of faith organizations with urban forestry plans whose funding is frozen may be far higher as several religious grantees did not respond to RNS' inquiries. The 300-plus affected were relayed to RNS by the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, Faith in Place and Creation Justice Ministries, each of which oversees grants to be distributed to various organizations.

The National Baptist Convention, USA, and the Church of God in Christ, two historically Black denominations, also each received a $1 million grant during the Biden administration as part of the IRA-funded urban forestry program. Their representatives did not respond to inquiries about the status of those projects that aimed to provide shade and lower electric bills in urban areas.

The threats to the promised funding — especially after recipients complied with all the steps of the application process — represent broken commitments, Martin said.

" Other than Jesus, who else can you trust other than the federal government of the United States of America?" Martin asked.

Martin framed the funding freeze as wasting money because it disrupts years of work. " We've been evaluated. We've been audited. We bring good returns. We can show with our after-school programs an improvement in kids' GPAs," he said.

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Some faith leaders remain optimistic about funding being restored. Avery Davis Lamb, executive director of Creation Justice Ministries, which works with Protestant and Orthodox Christians, said congregations in the network are excited about the possibility of studying the Bible's teaching on trees, especially Revelation 22, and planting them, "knowing what they're doing is an act of faith." The network's congregants " know that those trees are going to bring a lot of healing to the community," he said of its plans to plant trees in Austin, Texas; Nashville, Tennessee; Orlando, Florida; and Baltimore. Those plans, however, are now on pause.

The White House did not respond to an RNS request for comment about the status of the frozen funds and the impact on faith communities.

Moreover, the IRA funding freeze and other proposed Republican policies affect other faith-based environmental initiatives.

"The single biggest area where the religious community is mobilized is around the energy tax credits that were part of the Inflation Reduction Act," said Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, a board member of Interfaith Power & Light, which partners with congregations to address climate change, and the rabbinic adviser to the Coalition

on the Environment and Jewish Life. The IRA enabled nonprofits, including hundreds of congregations, to install renewable energy sources on their properties, allowing them to get credit on their electric bills.

In an August 2024 letter, members of the House Republican Conference urged Speaker Mike Johnson to seek options to prevent the repeal of the IRA's energy tax credits, saying a "full repeal would create a worst-case scenario where we would have spent billions of taxpayer dollars and received next to nothing in return."

House Republicans are divided over the IRA, with others pushing to repeal it, and among Senate Republicans are calls for greater tax cuts for oil and gas drillers.

GreenFaith, a global, multifaith climate advocacy nonprofit, is campaigning to block the expansion of subsidies for fossil fuel companies. The Rev. Fletcher Harper, an Episcopal priest and the organization's executive director, joined two other clergy on a visit Wednesday (Feb. 12) to congressional offices to beg alms for the fossil fuel industry — a satirical move intended to draw attention to Republican proposals.

" Religious faith traditions over the centuries have said that taxes are legitimate when they contribute to the common good. That's the ethical purpose of taxes," Fletcher said. "Subsidizing the fossil fuel industry is in no way a benefit for the public good at this point in history."

Meanwhile, the Rev. Leslie Copeland-Tune, chair of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, spoke at a Feb. 6 news conference with Climate Action Campaign activists and Democratic members of Congress outside the Environmental Protection Agency headquarters in Washington, D.C., to declare faith leaders' concerns about dismantling programs they believe are important for reducing pollution in water and air.

Copeland-Tune, who is also senior associate general secretary for the National Council of Churches, said: "Faith communities across the country have relied on EPA. Communities across the country have relied on the environmental justice programs. Lord help us if we have let these things be overturned and dismantled without fighting for them."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.