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Subject: RE: ODF NEWS | ODF adds capacity to its urban forestry program

From: Oregon Department of Forestry <odf@public.govdelivery.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 28, 2024 9:44 AM
To: lindaziedrich@gmail.com
Subject: ODF NEWS | ODF adds capacity to its urban forestry program

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Oregon Dept. of Forestry adds capacity to its urban forestry program with new hires

SALEM, Ore. – The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) is poised to provide increased service on tree-related matters to Oregon’s urban residents thanks to five new hires. Using funding from the Oregon State Legislature, and the USDA Forest Service through the federal Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), ODF has been able to hire a grants administrator and four new community assistance foresters – up from just one for the whole state.

Scott Altenhoff, Manager of ODF’s Urban and Community Assistance Forestry program, said he’s looking forward to how much more the added staff will allow the agency to do.

“With 241 cities and towns in Oregon spread over 90,000 square miles and only one urban forester, we were limited in how much support we could provide to any one community,” said Altenhoff. “With more staff, I’m excited we can engage with more communities to help them plan and manage their urban trees in accordance with best practices and the latest scientific research.”

Until now, Brittany Oxford had been the agency’s lone Community Assistance Forester. She has been joined since March 18 by Evan Elderbrock, Lilah Gonen, Alison Herrell and Jennifer Killian.

Killian left her position as urban forester for the City of Corvallis to join ODF. She has deep background in municipal forestry in her home state of Wisconsin, where she worked on that state's emerald ash borer team. Prior to her work for Corvallis, she was Volunteer Program Coordinator for the non-profit tree planting organization Friends of Trees. She holds a master's degree from Oregon State University focused on long-term strategic urban forestry management. She is a member of the Pacific Northwest chapter of International Society of Arboriculture and a past board member of Oregon Community Trees, serving as chair of its 2019 conference.

Herrell is a Board-Certified Master Arborist and a Qualified Tree Risk Assessor. She has worked in various environmental posts for the past 15 years. She spent several seasons early in her career as a field technician for non-profits doing restoration and conservation work, including an AmeriCorps position with The Nature Conservancy. After completing her master's degree in Environmental Science from Indiana University, she worked for six years in Chicago with a commercial and residential tree care company. There, she worked as a groundsperson, plant healthcare technician, tree climber, and consulting arborist. She then transitioned to a technical trainer role in Portland focusing on plant diagnostics, educating arborists about responsible integrated pest management practices, and planning for invasive pests. A part-time instructor at Portland Community College, she is in line to be the next president of the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture.

Elderbrock and Gonen are moving into permanent positions with ODF after serving as specialists outreaching to local communities on emerald ash borer preparation and management.

Elderbrock grew up in Wisconsin but now lives in Eugene. After earning a bachelor's degree in Geology from Macalester College in Minnesota, he worked briefly for the Minnesota Geological Survey. He then spent four years as a field ecology instructor in Maine and California. He later earned a master's degree in Environment Studies from the University of Oregon (UO). That's also where he completed his doctorate in Landscape Architecture in 2023.

Lilah Gonen has bachelor's degrees in Forestry and Geography from the University of California, Berkeley, and a master's in Botany and Plant Pathology from Oregon State University. Before joining ODF, Gonen did invasive insect surveying and eradication work with the Oregon Dept. of Agriculture, and urban forestry and wetland restoration work with the City of Gresham. Gonen specializes in forest pathology and invasive species management, including sudden oak death, Swiss needle cast, Japanese beetle, emerald ash borer, and various weeds.

"I'm eager to have such a well-qualified team to assist communities better manage their tree resources, including helping them inventory the trees they have and inputting the data into the TreePlotter Inventory System," said Altenhoff.

Thanks to a federal grant, Altenhoff said ODF is able to offer the tree inventory software free to Oregon cities and towns. "The advantage is that everyone can compare their trees to every other community in Oregon using the software. This will help us get a better understanding of what trees are doing well where, and which are struggling. This improves our ability to make region-specific recommendations on what to plant. It also helps cities and towns see more precisely what their risk from tree pests and diseases is."

Altenhoff said he sees increased opportunities for partnering with communities on important initiatives, especially with \$26.6 million in new federal funds coming to Oregon from the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

“Later this spring we expect to call for applications from community-based organizations, something our new grants administrator Hilary Olivos-Rood will be handling.”

Olivos-Rood moves into her new position after five years serving as the agency's administrator for the Board of Forestry and rulemaking coordinator. She also sits on ODF's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council. Before her time with ODF, she worked in Risk Management at the Department of Administrative Services. She holds a bachelor's degree in communication studies with a minor in civic engagement.

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