UMaine-led FOR/Maine coalition chosen as finalist for up to $100 million in EDA's Build Back Better Regional Challenge

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UMaine News

UMaine-led FOR/Maine coalition chosen as finalist for up to $100 million in EDA's Build Back Better Regional Challenge

Proposal aims to accelerate the Northern Forest Bioeconomy through innovation, commercialization, workforce and community redevelopment

December 14, 2021

The FOR/Maine Coalition has been named by the Economic Development Administration (EDA) as a finalist in the $1 billion Build Back Better Regional Challenge. The University of Maine was awarded the $500,000 grant to support the coalition to further develop and scale the forest bioeconomy in Maine and will advance to Phase 2 of the challenge competing for up to $100 million in American Rescue Plan funding.

The coalition's proposal, “Accelerating the Northern Forest Bioeconomy,” calls for the development of a Northern Forest bioeconomy cluster, representing an opportunity for rural, distressed communities in the Northeast hard-hit by the pandemic to build back better, cleaner, and greener through strategic investment in a sustainable transformation of Maine’s forest economy.

The proposal builds upon the Forest Opportunity Roadmap (FOR/Maine) vision and strategic plan for diversifying the state’s wood products businesses, attracting new capital investments, and developing greater economic prosperity for communities impacted by recent mill closures. Coalition members are a subset of FOR/Maine comprising the UMaine (proposal lead), Maine Development Foundation (MDF), Maine Forest Products Council (MFPC), Four Directions Development Corporation, Professional Logging Contractors of Maine, Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, Eastern Maine Development Corporation, Northern Maine Development Commission, Maine Community College System and Maine Woodland Owners.
“We are thrilled to have our proposal selected as a finalist in the Build Back Better Regional Challenge,” said Joan Ferrini-Mundy, president of UMaine and its regional campus, the University of Maine at Machias. “UMaine has a well-established reputation for excellence in forestry and as a leader in the research and development of bio-based materials and their applications. Maine's public universities also will play an essential role in developing talent as this sector expands. We are grateful for this Phase 1 award and the many contributions of our partners. We look forward to working together to make this vision a reality.”

To position Maine as significantly global and market competitive in bio-based materials and applications, the coalition is developing a comprehensive approach to assist Maine in pivoting from petroleum-based feedstocks and chemicals to bio-based, renewable products. This approach includes coordination of cluster activities; engagement of leadership in building welcoming, resilient and sustainable communities; reenergizing and redeveloping industrial sites; preparing Maine's workforce for the future; strategic investment and market attraction; establishing a forest biomaterials innovation center and a Green Engineering and Materials (GEM) Laboratory; and stimulating bioproducts supply chains by accelerating public procurement. More details are available on the EDA website.

“Forests and forest products are at the heart of Maine's rural communities and economy,” said Stephen Schley, chair of the FOR/Maine Executive Committee. “This initial grant in the Build Back Better Regional Challenge is a significant boost toward realizing our forest bioeconomy vision for Maine, which includes market development, workforce development, forest inventory and supply chain sustainability and increased prosperity for all the communities we work with. We are optimistic about the future ahead of us.”

The FOR/Maine effort to sustain and grow Maine's existing and emerging forest products economy enjoys strong support from Maine's congressional delegation, with Sens. Susan Collins and Angus King and Reps. Chellie Pingree and Jared Golden actively engaged in the initiative and with FOR/Maine members voicing support for the coalition proposal along with Gov. Janet Mills.

The Build Back Better Regional Challenge is assisting communities nationwide in their efforts to build back better by accelerating the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and building local economies that will be resilient to future economic shocks. The challenge is the largest economic development initiative from the U.S. Department of Commerce in decades.

“We are thrilled to help communities work together — in coalitions of government, nonprofits, academia, the private sector, and others — to craft ambitious and regionally unique plans to rebuild their communities,” Alejandra Y. Castillo, Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Economic Development said in a press release. “These projects will help revitalize local economies and tackle our biggest challenges related to climate change, manufacturing, supply chains and more. EDA is proud to ignite these plans and help communities nationwide build back better.”

Phase 1 of the Build Back Better Regional Challenge invited coalitions to apply for funding to implement a collection of three to eight distinct but related projects in their region. Projects need to be in coordination with industry and community partners, and aligned around a holistic vision to build and scale a strategic industry sector.

EDA received 529 applications from regions in all 50 states and five territories, and the 60 finalists represent regions that formed extraordinary coalitions, demonstrated regional needs, and presented bold proposals to grow their target industry clusters. Ranging from rural communities and coastal towns to major metros, the finalists make up a diverse cross-section of the United States.

In Phase 2, finalists will compete for significant implementation assistance. EDA will award 20-30 coalitions each up to $100 million. These awards will assist communities in executing ambitious plans to supercharge their regional economies across a variety of strategic growth sectors. The deadline for Phase 2 applications is March 15, 2022. Learn more at: eda.gov/arpa/build-back-better.

Coalition members voice their support:

“The power of FOR/Maine lies in combining the insight, assets, and leadership of industry, communities, and innovation,” said Yellow Light Breen, president and CEO, Maine Development Foundation. “Maine Development Foundation has been honored to bring our role as a trusted nonpartisan facilitator and source of solutions-oriented data, to help the stakeholders come together and keep moving forward together to pursue an ambitious vision for the next generation of the forest bioeconomy. In our Build Back Better proposal, we will sustain and grow good paying jobs, especially in rural Maine. We do this by seeking unprecedented resources to: help both idle and active forest mill campuses redevelop or expand with next generation forest products and other complementary businesses; implement a more seamless, proactive approach to supporting thriving rural communities in their economic diversification and growth efforts; prepare the workforce of the future and attract talented Mainers into the sector; and pursue an equitable, inclusive approach that ensures that all Mainers, including historically excluded or disadvantaged groups, can participate and share meaningfully in the projects and in the economic benefits of the sector. We are grateful to the many partners that made this Phase 1 award possible and that are committed to the work ahead.”
“The Advanced Structures and Composites Center is at the forefront of leveraging Maine’s abundant natural resources, like wood, to drive sustainable economic development opportunities through research, development, commercialization and workforce training,” said Habib Dagher, executive director, University of Maine Advanced Structures and Composites Center. “Working hand-in-hand with our partners, our goal is to develop the materials and technologies to drive future value streams for the Maine forest products industry and train our next-generation manufacturing workforce. Our Green Engineering and Materials (GEM) Factory of the Future, will use large 3D printers capable of printing homes, boats, and other large structures using Maine wood-derived material systems. This factory will build manufacturing capacity throughout Maine through technology development and workforce training, providing a shot in the arm to regions of the state impacted by mill closures and the supporting ecosystem. We thank the many partners that made this Phase 1 award possible.”

“Maine Woodward Owners celebrates this opportunity to achieve critical investment in Maine’s forest economy and communities,” said Tom Doak, executive director, Maine Woodward Owners. “A strong forest economy not only increases management options but allows woodland owners a financial return that makes it affordable to own land and keep woodland intact and producing all the public and environmental benefits of well managed forests. Family woodland owners are essential partners in building a better future for Maine’s forest economy, and we are excited to partner on a project that will engage with them on their terms, according to their values.”

“Maine loggers fully support this effort to develop, transform and expand our state’s forest economy and remain ready to supply the local wood fiber on which it depends,” said Dana Doran, executive director of the Professional Logging Contractors of Maine. “Now is the time to seize the opportunities before us as the most forested state in the nation with some of those most professional logging contractors in the country to build a sustainable future for our rural communities.”

“Having gone from working in the mill to seeing the transformation of Maine’s forest products industry first hand, I applaud the work of FOR/Maine, the University of Maine, and the entire coalition,” said Michael Michaud, chair of the East Millinocket Board of Selectmen. “Being accepted as a finalist in the Build Back Better Regional Challenge is very big news. $100 million will put the plans for the Forest Opportunity Roadmap into action quickly, and will ensure stability, growth, and opportunity within our Forest Products Industry for years and generations to come. The positive impact that this could have on our state, and the Katahdin region in particular, cannot be overstated. This is a very big deal and a very exciting day for this industry and our state.”

“The Forest Bioproducts Research Institute is pioneering enabling technologies to support the development of a range of bioproducts derived from wood,” said Hemant Pendse, director, Forest Bioproducts Research Institute. “Advancing forest-based technologies and supporting our region’s forest businesses is the heart of our mission at FBRI, and, by piloting bioproducts solutions in the areas of fuels, chemicals and advanced materials, we help build capability and capacity that encourages commercial development. Our interdisciplinary team is gratified to be working with this coalition of statewide partners to drive innovation and revitalization in Maine’s forest economy.”

“Our Katahdin joins the chorus of excitement around this coalition being named a finalist in the Build Back Better Regional Challenge,” said Steve Sanders, director of mill site redevelopment for Our Katahdin. “Dreaming big about what these funds could do for the industry, this state, and our workforce is part of the excitement. But the belief in what we are doing in Maine is also worth a great deal of optimism. More than 500 applications for this challenge were submitted, with 60 finalists chosen. I think that speaks volumes about our collective and collaborative approach, and I’m hopeful for great things to come as we continue through the process.”

“The Maine Forest Products Council is one of the founding members of the Forest Opportunity Roadmap (FOR/Maine) project and it is gratifying to receive this planning award so we can continue to build on our teams’ success,” said Patrick Strauch, executive director, Maine Forest Products Council. “Through the continued sustainable management of our forests, we can strengthen current markets for wood and continue to build in Maine’s emerging wood bioeconomy. Maine’s rural communities can celebrate this opportunity as well, because they support the forest industry and their health and prosperity continues to be a critical part of our work going forward.”

“This is an exciting opportunity for the Ashland Area Economic Development Corporation in our quest to establish a Renewable Energy Park on our newly acquired property,” said Don Tardie, president, Ashland Area Economic Development Corporation. “Ashland is the gateway to over 8 million acres of working forest that can provide over a million tons annually of underutilized fiber to supply a steam and electrical biomass generation facility. Our region would greatly benefit with the jobs created in the forest and the Renewable Energy Park.”

**About FOR/Maine**

Forest Opportunity Roadmap / Maine (FOR/Maine) is a unique cross-sector collaboration between industry, communities, government, education, and nonprofits, which have come together to ensure that Maine strategically adapts and capitalizes on changing markets to maintain our leading role in the global forest economy and support prosperity in our state. The coalition was
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created with support from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, and Maine's congressional delegation.

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