



Great Lakes region's governors, premiers want 250M more trees planted by 2033



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Planting more trees — a lot of them — is one of the more practical ways to lessen the impact of Earth’s changing climate.

But trees do a lot more than sequester carbon emissions.

Studies show they improve property values. They lower summer electric bills and cool off heat-stressed areas known as urban “heat islands” with their shade.

They improve air quality and water quality. They help prevent flooding and erosion. They serve as windbreaks. They provide wildlife habitat. They even provide psychological benefits by lifting spirits and lowering blood pressure, experts say.

Bowling Green awarded tree grant

The city Bowling Green was awarded an Urban and Community Forestry Inflation Reduction Act Grant for the preservation and extension of an old-growth urban forest, the city announced.

This grant, totaling \$415,000, will facilitate maintaining, enhancing, and promoting the urban tree canopy within the city.

A significant portion of the grant will be allocated to the maintenance and pruning of canopy trees. The project will also address safety concerns by identifying and removing trees that pose potential hazards. Additionally, efforts will be made to eradicate invasive tree species that threaten the health of the urban forest.

Source: Bowling Green

“These are no-brainer investments,” Patrick Doran, director of strategy, measures and science for the Nature Conservancy’s Michigan Chapter, said. “It’s natural infrastructure with dozens of benefits we know about and some we likely don’t know about.”

Recently, an eight-state, two-province group called Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors & Premiers called for 250 million more trees to be planted around the Great Lakes region by 2033.

How will it go about doing that?

Mike Piskur, project director, said it’s important to remember that nobody’s out there counting trees and doing audits of what plantings qualify to be part of the initiative.

The general idea, though, is to brainstorm with a lot of strategic planning and assessment over the next year, then kickstart a planting blitz that is already in various stages of deployment across the region in cities such as Toledo, Detroit, and Cleveland.

“We wanted to set up a number that’s achievable and also ambitious,” Mr. Piskur said. “We looked at things that were in motion already, longer-term goals and how to build on that.”

One of the limiting factors will be tree production.

Nobody knows if nurseries can produce enough trees to meet demand. But they agree they need to be encouraged to do so.

“We need to double production of trees in the pipeline,” Mr. Doran, who also teaches at Michigan State University, said. “We need to ramp up production big time.”

A big boost in planting is in order to help stave off reductions that could come from more invasive species, such as the emerald ash borer and the spotted lanternfly, along with the multitude of tree diseases.

Two of the worst over the past 120 years have been chestnut blight, which began destroying majestic American chestnut trees by spreading its infection across North America in 1904, and Dutch elm disease, a tree fungus that began destroying beautiful, shady elm trees several years later.

Now, as many as 10 million North American ash trees are being devastated by the emerald ash borer.

A 2022 study out of McGill University in Montreal predicts that 1.4 million trees planted along streetscapes across the United States will be killed by invasive insects by 2050.

The assessments will try to determine which states and provinces need more trees the most, and which forests, parks, streetscapes, and communities should get the greatest focus.

“We don't have enough trees and they're not in the right places,” Mr. Doran told attendees of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors & Premiers Leadership Summit in Cleveland on Oct. 14. “They tend to be in places of high economic income and not enough in low economic income.”

Michigan and Wisconsin are renowned for their large forests, as are the provinces of Ontario and Quebec.

One of the big pushes, though, is coming to urban corridors and especially into historically disadvantaged, low-income neighborhoods.

More trees are expected to be planted in such densely populated areas to improve property values and reduce the impact of climate-driven “heat islands” by providing more shade, as well as the physical and mental benefits that come with more tree canopy, officials said.

Toledo connection

Toledo Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz said a \$6.1 million grant issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in September for increasing the city's tree canopy will be used to plant 10,748 more trees in Toledo over five years.

That's about four times the normal rate of planting, he said.

"We just believe trees are crucially important to a community," Mayor Kapszukiewicz said.

He said he would "love to be part of" the broader and more ambitious goal announced by governors and premiers.

"They slow traffic, they cool neighborhoods, they reduce blood pressure with a more calming feeling, and they absolutely increase property values," Mayor Kapszukiewicz said. "I can't think of a single negative thing that comes from trees."

Toledo's tree canopy is "about half of what it should be," he said.

About 7,250 trees of the 10,748 trees being planted will be street trees in 10 U.S. Census tracts in Toledo that have the lowest tree cover.

Thirty-five to 40 percent tree cover is ideal. Canopy in each of those identified Census tracks is less than 10 percent, said Simon Nyi, Toledo grants commissioner.

"This project will directly contribute to that [250 million] number," he said.

Of the remaining trees, Mr. Nyi said that:

- 700 will be planted in Toledo city parks.
- 750 trees will be planted on publicly owned vacant lots, in coordination with the Lucas County Land Bank.
- 1,648 trees will be planted inside the Glass City Metropark and its future campground, Middlegrounds Metropark, and Manhattan Marsh Preserve Metropark.
- 400 trees will be planted on residential properties, combined with an education campaign and community "tree ambassador" program.

The city also will use its program, called RE-TREE Toledo (for Restoring and Enhancing Tree Canopy for Resilience, Equity, and Engagement in Toledo) to remove 500 dead, dying, or diseased trees and stumps, Mr. Nyi said.

The program also will be used to fund a paid summer training program in urban forestry for 56 Toledo Public Schools students from disadvantaged communities.

An employment opportunity as city seasonal workers will be offered after completion, in partnership with the Woodlawn Foundation and Toledo Public Schools, he said.

Educational programming also will be funded for 1,600 K-12 students and 40 community events, in partnership with Keep Toledo/Lucas County Beautiful, Mr. Nyi said.

“We are rolling this program out in a way that we're set up with a healthy tree canopy for years to come,” he said.

The lack of sufficient tree canopy “has real impacts on human health, the environment, climate, and other things,” Mr. Nyi said.

Junction insights

Alicia Smith, Junction Coalition executive director, said the lack of tree cover in disadvantaged neighborhoods “is astounding.”

She agrees with what many of the experts have said about the physical and psychological benefits that trees bring, along with shade to cool off urban heat islands and save on electricity costs. She also wants a long-term commitment.

“It’s going to take teaching our children and creating a workforce,” Ms. Smith said. “This is not a one-and-done.”

Area universities have, of course, long been supportive of tree-planting efforts.

One of the University of Toledo’s latest is its “Greening UToledo Through Service Learning” program, called [GUTS](#). It promotes more trees and native plants across the region.

Bowling Green State University said in an Oct. 18 Facebook post it is encouraging students to plant 4,500 trees on campus for what it calls its **#CampusSustainability** effort.

Bowling Green is receiving \$415,000 of U.S. Department of Agriculture money for tree-planting. Fostoria and Port Clinton are also recipients, said Amy Stone of the Ohio State University Extension.

“Trees really do matter. They are investments that increase as the trees grow,” she said. “It is imperative to remember [the] need to choose the right plant, for the right place. Diversity is also critical. We need to learn from the lessons of Dutch elm disease and emerald ash borer and the monocultures that were created in our urban centers especially.”

Ms. Stone said it is also important “to engage and train the next generation of arborists who will care for these trees into the future.”

“This is as important as the trees,” she said. “We need people who will care for our tree canopy, whether it is in municipalities, landscapes, parks, gardens and woodlots or forests”.

Dan Herms, vice president of research and development of the Davey tree company based in Kent, Ohio, said that trees are important tools for adapting to climate change but also said it’s important for the right ones to be planted in the right places.

“The climate is changing faster than the life span of a tree,” Mr. Herms said. “People should plant a tree that does well now and is also projected to do well for end of century.”

Ohio’s tree stock might actually be better prepared for climate change than many trees in northern Michigan or New England, he said.

“You have to see which ones are drought-tolerant or moisture-tolerant because of climate,” Mr. Herms said. “Ohio’s experiencing increased precipitation, but it’s erratic.”

Many people don’t realize that Arbor Day, which for many states comes in late April after Earth Day was founded by a Detroit native. Each state bases its Arbor Day celebration based on their specific planting zones.

[J. Sterling Morton](#) was so fond of the trees he left behind in southeast Michigan that he eventually founded Arbor Day out in Nebraska. He and his wife, Caroline, moved to Nebraska in 1854 as part of the westward migration when it was still a territory.

The Detroit area lost a lot of its tree canopy, but is now working hard to get it back.

This past month, plans for a program called the Detroit Tree Equity Partnership were announced.

A collaboration between American Forests, the city of Detroit, DTE Energy, Detroit Future City, and the Greening of Detroit, it will employ hundreds of Detroit residents in tree care and maintenance jobs.

According to a [Planet Detroit article](#), the partnership seeks to raise \$30 million over five years to plant 416,000 medium-sized shade trees in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The Fred A. and Barbara M. Erb Family Foundation awarded a pair of \$450,000 grants — one to American Forests and another to the Greening of Detroit — to bolster the campaign, which includes a \$485,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture grant received this past summer.

Chicago, the nation's third-largest city, has set a goal of planting 75,000 new trees through its [Our Roots Chicago](#) program that seeks to help it adapt to climate change.

While Chicago is the largest Great Lakes city, the Detroit-to-Cleveland corridor is the region's most populated shoreline.

The Cleveland Tree Coalition is making strides to improve tree canopy in that city, too.

Samira Malone, that group's director, told attendees at the recent Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors & Premiers Leadership Summit that Cleveland has undergone “decades of disinvestment and trauma” from tree losses.

“It's extremely important to understand how we got here with our decline in canopy,” she said during her presentation.

The Cleveland Tree Coalition has set a goal of having 28,000 trees a year planted to bring that city's canopy back over 30 percent in places that need them the most, she said.

Cleveland — once known as “the Forest City” — has lost about half of its tree canopy since the 1950s, according to the group's website.

It is as low as 18 percent in some areas now but is “in the midst of citywide neighborhood revitalization to improve the quality of life for all citizens, and improving tree canopy is an important element in that transformation,” the group states.

“Trees are a critical piece of infrastructure. They impact peoples' lives in a positive way,” Ms. Malone told summit attendees. “Trees have a direct economic benefit. They have a direct return on investment.”

Wisconsin announced on Earth Day 2021 that it would work with public and private collaborators to plant 75 million more trees by 2030 as part of a [Trillion Tree Pledge](#) being undertaken by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to ensure more protection for that state's existing forests and urban trees.

That state agency said more than 12.9 million trees were planted in Wisconsin in 2022.

Other examples were provided, too, such as what Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb told summit attendees has been occurring with tree plantings in that state.

The Great Lakes region's effort to ensure that at least 250 million more trees are in the ground by 2033 is highly ambitious, Mr. Piskur said, though he agreed there are other regional ecosystems — such as efforts to repopulate tropical rain forests — that are getting a lot of attention now, too.

The task for the Great Lakes region is to decide which areas need more trees to help carry forward efforts that have begun in this part of the world, he said.

“Diversity and climate resilience will go into the decision-making,” Mr. Piskur said.

He said it's a matter of "understanding the current trajectory and what more is possible."

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