

USDA Forest Service – Secure Rural Schools

Title III FAQs

Allowable uses - frequently asked questions

When must funds be obligated?

The Authority to initiate Title III projects for counties is September 30, 2025, and to obligate Title III funds by September 30, 2026. Any county funds not obligated by Sept. 30, 2026, must be returned to the U.S. Treasury.

What search and rescue and other emergency services, including firefighting and law enforcement, may be reimbursed using Title III funds?

Under P.L. 115-141, section 302(a)(2) provides that Title III funds may be used to reimburse counties for search and rescue and other emergency response activities, including firefighting and law enforcement patrols, performed on national forests and the specified BLM lands in western Oregon and paid for by the county. Specifically, the following expenses paid for by the county may be reimbursed in proportion to the amount attributable to these emergency response services performed on a national forest or the specified BLM lands:

- Salary or wages of emergency response personnel deployed during an emergency response.
- Replacement of equipment, material and supplies expended, damaged or destroyed during an emergency response.
- Repair of equipment damaged during an emergency response.
- Maintenance of vehicles, equipment, and facilities during an emergency response.
- Purchase of capital equipment such as the purchase of a fire engine, a search-and-rescue snowmobile, or other emergency response equipment.
- Expenses of training personnel to respond to emergencies on national forests.
- Expenses of equipment and supplies to be kept on hand for response to emergencies on national forests.
- Expenses of non-disposable personal protective equipment and electronic aids such as GPS devices in anticipation of responding to emergencies.
- Purchase of equipment for 911 emergency systems.

What are examples of search and rescue and other emergency services expenses that may not be reimbursed?

- Expenses for capital improvements such as construction of a fire station or emergency services dispatch center.
- Purchase of land (real estate) such as for a fire station or an airport to be used primarily for fire suppression on national forest and other nearby forested lands.
- Maintenance or upgrade of an airport, dispatch center or other facility used primarily for emergency services.

- Repair or reconstruction of a road after a storm event.
- Salary or wages of fire patrols or emergency response personnel during routine duties and scheduled patrols.
- Maintenance or operating costs of fire patrol and emergency response equipment during routine duties and scheduled patrols.
- Development or maintenance of a 911 emergency system, unless carried out under a community wildfire protection plan.

May a county use Title III funds for the development of a 911 emergency system including mapping of county roads, naming roads, locating structures and improvements on mapping system, developing data bases for emergency 911 system?

No. Title III funds may not be used for the development or maintenance of a 911 emergency response system, unless carried out under a community wildfire protection plan.

Relevant data gathered during an authorized use such as a Firewise Communities program community assessment or as part of the development of a community wildfire protection plan in coordination with the Forest Service may be shared with 911 system administrators.

Can Title III funds be used for hazardous fuel reduction projects that are identified in an approved community wildfire protection plan?

Yes. Activities to implement a community wildfire protection plan are authorized uses of Title III funds. For example, creating fuel breaks outside the home ignition zone and creating water sources for fire-fighting purposes.

Activities such as hazardous fuel reduction or treatments to improve forest health and resilience to wildfire, insect and disease that are recommended in a community wildfire protection plan and benefit national forest lands also may be considered by resource advisory committees for funding under Title II.

What activities to carry out community wildfire protection plans may be reimbursed using Title III funds?

A county may use Title III funds to carry out community wildfire protection plans (CWPPs), including but not limited to paying for the cost of:

- Hazardous fuels reduction projects such as creating fuel breaks outside the home ignition zone, creating water sources for fire-fighting purposes, and establishing a 911 emergency response system.
- Wildfire mitigation assessments of the homes in an at-risk neighborhood identified in the CWPP.
- Tree removal, tree trimming, or removal of dried grass and brush and other such vegetation identified as contributing to fire risk in the CWPP.
- Removing hazardous fuels along powerline rights-of-way identified in the CWPP, regardless of the person or entity responsible for the removal.
- Conducting a community volunteer work day focused on implementing fire mitigation measures outlined in a CWPP.

What activities may be carried out under the Firewise Communities program?

The Act is very specific. Consistent with the Government Accountability Office recommendations, a county's use of Title III funds for Firewise activities must be limited to providing specific wildfire-related education or wildland fire mitigation assistance to homeowners. Specifically, section 302(a)(1) authorizes Title III funds to be spent on Firewise Communities program activities that:

1. educate homeowners in fire-sensitive ecosystems about techniques in siting (positioning or locating) a home, constructing a home, landscaping and maintenance around a home that will decrease the risk of injury or death and decrease the risk of damage or destruction of a home as a result of a wildfire in the area surrounding a home, or
2. assist homeowners in implementing these techniques.

Examples of education assistance to homeowners include:

- Disseminating Firewise information with door hangers, print or radio advertisements;
- Making Firewise information available at community events;
- Holding Firewise educational workshops for homeowners;
- Creating or distributing videos on Firewise principles related to the home ignition zone and fire-resistant building materials; and
- Outfitting and staffing Firewise trailers or mobile units to educate homeowners about the Firewise principles related to the home ignition zone and fire-resistant building materials.

Examples of mitigation assistance to homeowners include:

- Assisting communities with Firewise planning, including conducting a Firewise community assessment;
- Hosting "clean-up days" to encourage homeowners to remove brush and other vegetation from around their homes;
- Assisting communities with applications for Firewise Communities recognition;
- Providing grants or partial funding for removal of vegetation from around homes;
- Salary and transportation costs for youth crews removing vegetation from around homes;
- Supervision, transportation and related costs for parolees or prisoners removing vegetation from around homes; and
- Providing chippers to treat hazardous vegetation within the home ignition zone.

May a county expend Title III funds for Firewise activities in communities that are not a Firewise Communities/USA Recognized Site?

Section 302(a)(1) limits authorized activities to those activities "under the Firewise Communities program." We interpret this language as limiting a county's use of Title III funds to the following activities:

- Activities carried out in a community that is Firewise Community/USA Recognized Site.

- Activities carried out by a community to become recognized as a Firewise Communities/USA Recognized Site.
- Activities necessary to renew recognition as a Firewise Communities/USA Recognized Site.

Activities aimed at recognition or renewal should occur within 12 months or less of recognition or renewal to be authorized uses of Title III funds.

Counties are not eligible for recognition as a Firewise Community/USA Recognized Site under the Firewise Community Program. However, counties can successfully support small communities, subdivisions and neighborhoods in their jurisdictions in the recognition process. To become recognized, communities must undertake the following five actions:

1. Complete a community assessment and create a plan.
2. Form a Firewise Board or Committee.
3. Hold a Firewise Day event.
4. Invest a minimum of \$2/capita in local wildfire mitigation projects. (Volunteer hours, equipment use, time contributed by agency fire staff, and grant funding can be included.)
5. Submit an application to the Firewise Communities Program via their state liaison.

A county may use Title III funds in providing assistance or support of a community's Firewise Communities/USA recognition process, including:

- Conducting or assisting with community assessments;
- Helping the community create an action plan;
- Assisting with an annual Firewise Day;
- Assisting with treating vegetation within the home ignition zone; and
- Communicating with the state liaison and the national program to ensure a smooth application process.

Communities must renew their status annually to retain recognition as a Firewise Community/USA Recognized Site. Counties can assist in ensuring an annual Firewise Day takes place and can help fund or support projects in the home ignition zone to make homes less vulnerable to wildfires.

Can Title III funds be spent to reimburse a participating county for search and rescue or other emergency services performed on National Park Service or Bureau of Land Management lands?

No. Emergency services that are reimbursed with Title III funds must be performed on national forests and certain Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in Oregon.

Title III funds may be used to reimburse a participating county for emergency services on Federal land as defined in the Act. The Act's definition of Federal lands does not include national grasslands, national parks, wildlife refuges, BLM public domain lands or other lands administered by the Department of the Interior except for revested Oregon and California Railroad and reconveyed Coos Bay Wagon Road grant lands administered by the BLM in western Oregon.

What are examples of emergency services?

The Secure Rural Schools Act specifically cites search and rescue and firefighting as examples of emergency services. Other examples include responding to flooding, tsunamis, landslides, avalanches,

tornadoes or other high-wind events, and medical emergencies to provide first-aid or to prevent risk of human injury or death or damage to property. The response must take place during or immediately following the emergency event.

Title III funds may be used to reimburse a participating county for emergency services carried out on Federal land in response to the COVID-19 National Emergency.

Routine sheriff's patrols of national forest roads and campgrounds, clean-up after a flood event, "mop-up" after a wildfire is contained and similar follow-up actions not carried out during or immediately following the emergency event are not emergency services as envisioned in the Secure Rural Schools Act.

Can Title III funds be spent on planning protection of communities not directly adjacent to national forest lands but adjacent to other federal lands?

Community wildfire protection plans have various footprints and often address lands not directly adjacent to national forests that share the same fireshed as national forest lands. Firesheds are lands around a community where wildfire ignitions could cause fires to spread into the community. Title III funds received from the Forest Service may be used to fund the planning. If Forest Service employees are involved in developing or updating a community wildfire protection plan that addresses national forest lands and other federal, state, county, municipal, tribal or private lands all within the same fireshed.

If BLM personnel are involved in developing or updating a community wildfire protection plan that addresses O&C and Coos Bay Wagon Road lands and other federal, state, county, municipal, tribal or private lands, all within the same fireshed, Title III funds received from the BLM may be used to fund the planning.

Can Title III be used to fund community wildfire protection plans without coordination with the Secretary concerned?

No. The Act specifically requires community wildfire protection plans developed with Title III funding to be coordinated with the Secretary concerned. Title III may be used to fund the development or updating of a community wildfire protection plan in coordination with Forest Service or BLM personnel, as appropriate to the source of the Title III payment, acting on behalf of the Secretary for the purpose of this section of the Act.