

NEWS RELEASE

USDA Forest Service

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San Francisco Trees Poised to Provide Big Benefits

San Francisco, CA, November 26, 2003 – San Francisco’s investment in street trees is about to pay off. According to researchers at the US Forest Service’s Center for Urban Forest Research in Davis, the city’s population of approximately 100,000 street trees is now large enough to begin providing bigger benefits, despite the fact that nearly another 100,000 empty sites still exist. On Friday, November 14, 2003, they presented their findings from a study of San Francisco’s street trees to the city’s Urban Forest Council. The study was commissioned to determine how well street trees, the city’s living infrastructure, contribute to the quality of life for San Franciscans.

“We chose San Francisco because of its significance in northern California.” said Dr. Greg McPherson, Center Director. “It is the largest city we have studied. Our findings will provide the city’s Bureau of Forestry, the Urban Forest Council and the Friends of the Urban Forest with specific knowledge to maximize the benefits of planting and maintaining street trees.”

The report suggests that, because more than 65% of the street trees are young and in good health, they are in a position to provide even more quality-of-life benefits as

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they mature and get larger. “The decision that the city and Friends of the Urban Forest made more than two decades ago to begin planting trees on a regular basis is starting to pay huge dividends”, said Dr. McPherson. “By aggressively filling the 100,000 empty sites throughout the city, benefits to the residents of San Francisco will more than double in the next 25 years as the city’s urban forest matures and fills in.”

According to the recently released report, the city’s street tree population contributes over \$7.5 million in benefits annually. The biggest benefit is property value enhancement, but the trees also make significant contributions to stormwater control, air quality improvement, and energy conservation. “The total value of the benefits these trees provide is actually quite higher”, said Dr McPherson. “If we were able to obtain values for improvements in community health such as stress reduction, a decreased need for medication, lower levels of domestic violence, and increases in business revenue, the actual figure would be considerably higher, probably 50% higher, approaching \$12 to \$13 million dollars per year. This is significant, but we have no way of attaching a value to these benefits...yet. However, we are working on it.”

The report also provides some specifics on tree condition and infrastructure conflicts, pointing out that 60% of the trees are in good or fair condition, with less than 10% in poor or dying condition. Only 15% of the trees are causing some sidewalk heave, and less than 10% are obstructing signage or growing into overhead wires.

“One surprising finding,” according to Scott Maco, who led the research study for the Center, “is the disparity between neighborhoods. Tree benefits vary widely from neighborhood to neighborhood, mainly because some neighborhoods have fewer, younger trees of smaller stature than others. This just points out the need to fill each

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vacant sites with an appropriate tree, improve the health of all trees, and maximize the ability of each tree to provide benefits through proper pruning and maintenance.”

“This report is certainly one big piece of the puzzle for us,” said Paul Sacamano, Urban Forestry Manager for San Francisco. “It outlines the challenges we are facing with regard to equitable distribution of benefits throughout the city, but another piece of the puzzle is our budget. Unless we can overcome our own internal financial struggle we will continue to be confronted with limited resources that are needed to improve our street tree resource.” Mr. Sacamano works closely with the city’s Urban Forest Council which coordinates the various agencies and organizations that plant and maintain the city’s urban forest. The Council is currently developing a comprehensive Urban Forest plan, and according to Council Chair Francesca Vietor, “the study provides useful information that can help us develop sound urban forest policy, especially when considered alongside existing data on trees in our parks, on private property, as well as in larger areas such as the Presidio.”

Since the majority of street trees are owned and maintained by property owners and residents, the city will continue to cooperate with the Friends of the Urban Forest to plant trees throughout the city. “We will improve how we select trees, relying more on well-adapted, long-lived trees to maximize future benefits. We will also improve on our young tree care to reduce future maintenance costs,” said Milton Marks, Executive Director of the Friends of the Urban Forest.

The city plans to selectively remove and replace trees that are dying, especially in areas of the city where mostly older trees predominate. According to Mr. Sacamano, “Some next steps will be to target a few species that are really causing us some

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problems, look at our pruning cycles, and set some maintenance priorities that will produce the biggest payback in terms of tree health, safety and benefits”

The Center teamed with the Department of Public Works, Bureau of Urban Forestry, and the Friends of the Urban Forest to measure trees, calculate their benefits, and determine the most cost efficient way to manage them. Mohammed Nuru, Deputy Director of Operations, SF Dept. of Public Works, said “we have looked forward to this report for some time. Before this report we only knew how to manage trees. Now we have the information that will help us manage tree benefits. And that can only result in a better quality of life for city residents.”

Mr. Marks commented that, “our organization is dedicated to improving our city’s urban forest. This report allows us to demonstrate the true value of our trees. We can now show the significant contribution trees make in controlling stormwater runoff and reducing pollution of our Bay. We can also demonstrate the benefits of cleaner air in San Francisco.”

This research study is the most comprehensive assessment of street trees in northern California. “Our report shows that San Francisco street trees are quite valuable, worth the city’s investment of time and resources, and that they are a necessary part of the city’s infrastructure”, said Dr. McPherson. “We can also demonstrate that they are vital to community health and well-being, and that they have a positive impact on business and the city’s tax base. Not that many years ago city trees were only valued for their beauty. People didn’t think beyond beautiful park trees or wonderful fall color. Now science can show that trees are much more than just beauty. In fact, trees improve the quality of life in cities.”

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