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Wood Banks are Keeping Communities Warm

By Elisa Schine

Each winter, through formal and informal systems, communities in Maine help neighbors access firewood to heat their homes. At least eight organized groups in the state call themselves “wood banks” and give free or discounted firewood to households in need. Each is set up and operated locally and volunteers are in charge of cutting, splitting, and distributing the wood. This promotes efficiency, shrinks the operation’s carbon footprint, and prevents the spread of insect pests. Not only are households supported by wood banks in a material sense, the community at large benefits by bringing together people over shared work.

Individuals and small organizations have operated wood banks for decades, however, in 2020, they began gaining visibility and funding thanks to the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. This legislation included support to increase the number of and capacity of wood banks, and nearly all of the wood banks in Maine have been awarded grants from the USDA Forest Service.

After two cycles of grant funding and a year of research and outreach, the effect of this funding is beginning to show. In Maine alone, two new wood banks have popped up in Surry and Topsham, and there is interest in starting a wood bank from at least three more communities.

So, how does a wood bank get started?



Photo: DownEast Wood Bank

Volunteers split and stack wood at the DownEast Wood Bank in Surry.



Photo: Ernest Carle, Princeton Wood Bank

The wood shed at the Princeton Wood Bank.

The creation of a wood bank is based from a desire to meet a local need and the identifying of available resources. Often, firewood is supplied by tree care and utility companies who have wood they want to dispose from their yards or that they removed from transmission lines. Alternatively, land trusts or small woodland owners may be willing to sell or donate firewood-quality logs. Location of wood banks can range from public works lots to a volunteer’s driveway, and distribution cycles can vary from weekly to annually. Determining who receives wood and how, what processing equipment is used, how the wood is safely stored, and managing legal and liability issues when working with volunteers are other considerations for those starting up a wood bank. A good source of information for communities is “Community Guide to Starting and Running a Wood Bank,” produced by the University of Maine. It is found at: www.mainewoodlandowners.org/resourcepage#woodheat.

When asked what advice he had for people starting a wood bank, one organizer with the DownEast Wood Bank in Princeton wrote, “find a retired person in good health who can have fun processing firewood.” The wood bank’s shed holds about six cords of wood, cut by the organizer and split by volunteers. Those who run out of firewood at the end of winter can request it from the wood bank.

The Waldo County Woodshed, based in Searsmont, uses a commercial lot to cut, split, and store their firewood which tops 100 cords each year. The volunteers come each Saturday morning for six months of the year and process and distribute wood on site. Anyone who calls ahead to request wood can pick up a

Maine Wood Banks

Castine Wood Bank	Castine	gtenney@maine.rr.com
Waldo County Woodshed	Searsmont	waldowoodshed@gmail.com
DownEast Wood Bank	Surry	woodbankerme@gmail.com
H.O.M.E.	Orland	assistantdirector@homeincme.org
Boothbay Woodchucks	Boothbay	holly.stover@crcboothbay.org
Cumberland Wood Bank	N. Yarmouth	cumberlandwoodbank@gmail.com
C.H.I.P. Inc. (Community Housing Improvement Project) Firewood Bank	Newcastle	info@chipinc.org
Niweskok Wood Shed	Northport	alivia@niweskok.org
Midcoast Wood Bank	Topsham	woodbanks207@gmail.com

quarter cord on a Saturday morning. Because the wood bank serves residents of surrounding counties as well as those in Waldo, it has several satellite distribution sites. At noon, the volunteers enjoy donuts or a beer together to mark the end of the workday.

Another group, H.O.M.E.'s wood bank in Orland, is part of a larger organization that houses a food pantry, housing assistance, craft classes, a thrift store, a cedar sawmill and more. One employee is in charge of processing all of the firewood, though groups of volunteers come at varying times throughout the year to help split and stack wood under cover. Applicants receive one cord of firewood per winter. H.O.M.E. works on the firewood supply year-round to make sure that the wood they distribute is properly dried before it is used.

As members of the communities they serve, wood bank organizers and volunteers can often seek local resources for support. However, there are nationwide resources available to help fund and guide wood banks. The Alliance for Green Heat distributes direct grants from the USDA Forest Service to new and existing wood banks, with applications accepted on a first come, first serve basis (www.firewoodbanks.org). The next grant cycle will open this summer or fall. The Environmental Protection Agency's Burn Wise program offers materials to aid in the safe and efficient storage and use of firewood (www.epa.gov/burnwise).

The National Wood Bank Project supports a nation-wide network of wood bank volunteers to connect with each other and share knowledge. Our biggest event, the 2023 National Firewood Bank

Summit was a time for organizers to share their ideas and perspectives. The recording of the conference is available to view at www.extension.umaine.edu/community/firewood-banks.

All wood banks have different origin stories, but with a common thread: someone decided to directly address a need they saw in their community. With the right resources, like firewood, equipment, volunteers, or know-how,

you too, can organize an impactful way to help your neighbors stay warm through the winter.

Elisa Schine is the National Wood Bank Project Outreach Coordinator at the University of Maine School of Forest Resources and University of Maine Cooperative Extension, Piscataquis County. Email: elisa.schine@maine.edu

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