

Cumberland Forest Community Fund



Cumberland Forest Community Fund 2026-2027 Grant Application Guidelines

Application Submission Deadline: March 27, 2026

Program support provided by the Cumberland Forest Limited Partnership, the Anne and Gene
Worrell Foundation, and The Nature Conservancy
Program administration by The University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVA Wise)

**Cumberland Forest Community Fund
Request for Applications (RFA)**

I. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The Cumberland Forest Community Fund is a competitive local grant program supporting nature-based economic diversification and community development in seven counties in Southwest Virginia (Wise, Russell, Tazewell, Dickenson, Buchanan, Lee, Scott, and City of Norton). The program supports projects and initiatives that seek to produce “triple bottom line outcomes.” Triple bottom line outcomes include tangible contributions to: (1) local economies (e.g., jobs, visitor spending, lodging taxes, etc.), (2) increased community capacity (e.g., green infrastructure investments, outdoor recreation/tourism capacity building, strategic planning, creation of local policies/conditions that enable nature-based economic development, etc.), and (3) enhanced environmental quality (e.g., benefits to land, water, and air quality).

Awarded projects must be consistent with the program goals and objectives outlined herein. Projects that include physical assets must locate those assets on either government, public, or municipal lands.

\$100,000 in funding, provided to UVA Wise by the Cumberland Forest Limited Partnership and the Anne and Gene Worrell Foundation, is available in this round of grants.

II. APPLICATION SUBMISSION

Eligible applicants must submit one copy of the grant application form for each project proposal. An electronic version of the application is located at the UVA Wise Oxbow Center website (<http://www.oxbowcenter.com/communityfund>). Hard copy applications must be sent to the following address:

UVA Wise
Office of Economic Development
ATTN: Vickie Ratliff
1 College Avenue
Wise, VA 24293

Contact: Vickie Ratliff, UVA Wise
Phone: 276-973-6046
Email: cfcf@uvawise.edu
CC: vratliff@uvawise.edu

Each application must include a detailed budget. Accompanying letters of support are encouraged but not required (see page 5, Letters of Support), as well as any additional documentation including but not limited to maps, site plans, permits, etc.

Electronic, mailed, and hand-delivered applications must be received by 5:00 PM on March 27, 2026.

These guidelines along with additional information surrounding the grant program are posted on the UVA Wise Oxbow Center website. Please email cfcf@uvawise.edu if you have questions on the application process, eligibility requirements, or contents of this RFA.

III. ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUNDS

The mission of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. The vision of TNC is a world where the diversity of life thrives, and people act to conserve nature for its own sake and its ability to fulfill our needs and enrich our lives. TNC works in all 50 states and more than 35 countries—protecting natural habitats around the world. TNC pursues non-confrontational, pragmatic solutions to conservation challenges, partnering with communities, businesses, governments, multilateral institutions, and other non-profits. TNC's Clinch Valley Program, established in 1990, works collaboratively with local communities to support sustainable economic development and recreational opportunities that are consistent with protecting the region's lands, waters, and way of life. NatureVest is the in-house impact investing team at TNC, working with colleagues and conservation collaborators around the world to source and structure investment products that support TNC's mission at scale.

In 2019, TNC and NatureVest announced the formation of the Cumberland Forest Project and the acquisition of more than 253,000 acres in the Central Appalachian Coalfields. The Cumberland Forest Limited Partnership owns the land, while TNC serves as the manager of the lands and the Limited Partnership. To support economic diversification in the Coalfields region, the Cumberland Forest Community Fund has been established as a new grant program designed to provide resources to locally driven projects that support economic diversification, community development, and environmental stewardship.

The University of Virginia's College at Wise is a public, four-year liberal arts college located in Wise, Virginia. Established in 1954 as a college of the University of Virginia, the institution is guided by the values of citizenship and altruism. Proud of its Appalachian heritage, the College continues to honor its commitment of service to Southwest Virginia, the nation, and the world. The College's Office of Economic Development supports the surrounding region by connecting the wealth of resources available at the University of Virginia and partnering organizations to opportunities in Southwest Virginia; linking the community to faculty, staff, and students; serving as a source of professional and leadership development; and supporting the economic development community.

The Anne & Gene Worrell Foundation partners to cultivate resilient communities and ecosystems in the places the Worrells called home. The foundation focuses its grantmaking primarily in Southwest Virginia and the Charlottesville and Surry, Virginia areas. For more information, visit www.agworrellfoundation.org.

IV. ESTIMATED TIMELINE OF KEY DATES

January 15, 2026 — RFA Announcement
March 27, 2026 — Application Deadline
May 2026 — Announcement of Awards Anticipated
June 2026 — Contract Orientation and Award Celebration
August 2026 — Begin Issuing Grant Agreements
September 2026 — Awarded Projects Should Be Underway

V. MAP OF THE GRANT PROGRAM AREA



VI. GENERAL GUIDELINES

Program Eligibility

The grant program is open to organized community groups, non-profit organizations, government entities, and municipalities that have or intend to have a significant operating presence in the outlined eligible counties. Eligible applicants must provide a valid federal ID number and a current financial audit (dated within the past year). If the applicant does not have one, a fiscal agent should be clearly identified within the application. The project idea may be an original concept or an extension of a current activity, product, service, community capacity building program, or social venture.

Applicants that currently hold a Cumberland Forest Community Fund award may apply for additional funding, if there is measurable progress being made on an existing grant. 2026 applicants that have an open contract with UVA-Wise for a previous Cumberland Forest Community Fund award may be asked to provide a detailed explanation that demonstrates an ability to complete existing work within its approved contract period.

Partnerships and Letters of Commitment

Partnership projects are encouraged between eligible applicants. However, there can only be one designated project applicant named on the grant application. If the project involves a partnership, the designated project applicant is considered to be the one eligible applicant designated as the lead applicant. If the designated project applicant ultimately receives a grant award, that applicant will be required to assume the responsibility for entering into a contract with UVA Wise and will be responsible for any subcontracting associated with the project. Letters of commitment from collaborating partners must be provided at the time of application.

Letters of Support

Relevant letters of support from stakeholders are encouraged to strengthen the proposal. Letters of support must be provided at the time of application.

Available Funding

For this particular grant period, UVA Wise anticipates that at least \$100,000 will be made available.

Matching Funds

This grant does not require the applicant to provide matching funds. The grant award may fund up to 100% of a project's costs. However, advantage will be given to grant applications that demonstrate a commitment to provide additional deliverables using other funding sources (see page 8, Grant Selection Criteria).

Project Award

Recipients of grant funding will be notified of an official grant award via a letter of award from UVA Wise. An award agreement (grant contract) must then be finalized between the grantee and UVA Wise. Work on the awarded grant project may begin once the grant contract is fully executed. The grant contract will include a project scope of work, performance timeline, project budget, and standard contract clauses. Costs incurred either before or after the contractual performance period will not be considered eligible expenses. Projects must be completed within one year of the executed award agreement.

Accessibility

Projects should strive to comply with applicable laws requiring accessibility, e.g., State and Federal laws, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines, and ABA Accessibility Guidelines for Outdoor Developed Areas (36 CFR Part 1195).

Ground or Waterway Disturbance

If applicable to the project, applicants must determine to what extent, if any, ground or waterway disturbance will be involved in the proposed project (such as for clearing, grading, installation of underground utilities, etc.). Submit any maps or site plans that show the areas to be disturbed, along with a description of applicable best management practices that will be used to minimize environmental impact. Additionally, provide details on any required local, state, or federal permits, including a status update on the project's efforts to obtain those permits.

Ownership

If the applicant or a partner is not the owner of property involved in the proposed project, the applicant must secure the landowner(s) support. The landowner must convey that he/she will enter into a legally binding agreement (e.g., public easement or signage easement) with the applicant if there is not one already in place, if necessary, to ensure access to improve or maintain the property throughout the life of the project. The application must be accompanied by either a letter of support from the landowner or a copy of said legally binding agreement.

The applicant may be required to enter into a legally binding agreement with the landowner before entering into a contract with UVA Wise.

Capacity and Resource Needs Assessment

Applicants may be required to complete a capacity and resource needs assessment that demonstrates the applicant's ability to successfully complete the project and maintain it once implemented. If selected, supplemental trainings and workshops may be made available on an as-needed basis to further enhance community and economic development skills during the project.

Additional Requirements

All projects must comply with the Uniform Fire Prevention and Building Code, the State Labor Law, and the Workers' Compensation Law and any other applicable State, Federal or Local laws.

Eligible Expenses

Grant funds may be used for the following costs:

1. Direct salary costs for applicant employees while working directly on awarded project, including personal service salaries and fringe benefits. Fringe benefits are limited to 15% of direct salary costs for applicant employees while working directly on awarded project.
2. Direct non-salary costs, including costs for printing, photocopying, travel, materials, supplies, equipment (including rental), consultant, and contractual services, legal, and other goods and services directly associated with the project.

The following will not be paid with grant funds:

1. Indirect or overhead costs of the municipality, such as rent, telephone service, and general administrative support.
2. Salaries and other expenses of elected officials, whether incurred for purposes of project direction, execution, or legislation.
3. Costs of preparing the grant application.
4. Costs associated with planning and design not integral to project implementation.
5. The purchase of any live animals.

Grant assistance requested not to exceed 100% of cost.

Reporting

Awarded applicants will be required to report monthly progress updates throughout the course of the project. Monthly reports should include a progress summary, financial statements, and

associated proof of payment for eligible expenses. Awardees will be required to document the project with pictures as well as provide a project completion statement. Accurate financial accounting and financial reporting is a requirement of funding.

Recognition of Funding

Recipients of a grant will be required to communicate that project funding was provided through the Cumberland Forest Community Fund. This acknowledgement will be provided by UVA Wise and required in any communication with the public, which includes plans presented to the public, press releases, and any other marketing and signage funded by the grant.

VII. PROCESS FOR REVIEW AND SELECTION OF PROJECTS

Pre-Review

All applications will first be reviewed according to the following:

1. The application presents a nature-based economic and community development project or initiative that produces a “triple bottom line outcome.” Triple bottom line outcomes are tangible contributions that:
 - Improve local economies (e.g., jobs, visitor spending, lodging taxes, etc.)
 - Increase community capacity (e.g., green infrastructure investments, leadership development, outdoor recreation/tourism capacity building, strategic planning, creation of local policies/conditions that enable nature-based economic development, marketing and promotion, etc.
 - Enhance environmental quality (e.g., benefits to land, water, and air resource quality)
2. The applicant is an eligible community group, non-profit, government agency, or municipality. Eligible applicants must provide a valid federal ID number.
3. The project is located wholly within the geographic boundaries of the Virginia counties Wise, Russell, Tazewell, Dickenson, Buchanan, Lee, Scott, or City of Norton.
4. The application was received or postmarked by the application deadline.

If the answer to any of the above is “no,” the application will not be considered eligible for further review or evaluation.

Projects that are exclusively ‘planning’ in scope will be considered but preference will be given to those that are either “design/build” or leverage funding that has been secured for implementation.

Review and Scoring

If the answer to all the above is “yes,” the application meets eligibility criteria and will be further evaluated and scored by a review panel. The review panel will evaluate and score all eligible applications using the grant selection criteria identified in the next section of this RFA. The review panel is made of 6-8 members with representatives from UVA-Wise, The Nature Conservancy, The Anne & Gene Worrell Foundation, community leaders, and “subject matter experts” that have strategic expertise within the scope of an individual application. A consultation visit may be requested to better understand the project and site conditions.

Grant Selection Criteria

Once a proposal meets all criteria of the pre-review, a successful proposal is expected to address all of the following grant selection criteria. Each element will be evaluated to assess the degree to which the application meets the grant selection criteria and effectively meets the goals of the grant program.

- Economic Impact
 - How does the project generate a positive economic impact or otherwise support economic diversification (e.g., increased revenue, tax base, jobs, etc.) in the grant-eligible counties?
- Environmental Impact
 - How does the project enhance the condition of land and water resources; promote sustainable use or enjoyment of natural resources or scenic aspects; or promote outdoor assets within the grant-eligible counties?
- Community Impact
 - To what extent does the project support established community priorities and/or increase community capacity for supporting the expansion of natural asset-based economies (e.g., green infrastructure investments, outdoor recreation/tourism capacity building, strategic planning, creation of local policies/conditions that enable nature-based economic development, etc.)?
- Connection to Community Master Plan and/or Regional Strategy Alignment
 - Does the project build on previous community planning and economic development activities by implementing an objective from an existing Southwest Virginia strategic plan?
 - Does the project promote regionalism and strengthen collaboration between communities in the counties of Wise, Russell, Tazewell, Dickenson, Buchanan, Lee, Scott, and City of Norton? If yes, which ones?

- Strategic Partnerships
 - Does the project have one or more partners (municipalities, government agencies, businesses, not-for-profit or volunteer organizations) with skills and capabilities that will contribute to and improve the final product?
- Budget/Leveraged Funding
 - Is the project budget cost effective, accurate, well-balanced, and reasonable?
 - Does it leverage other private and public sources of money (not required)?
- Milestones & Deliverables
 - Does the application demonstrate a strong plan for tracking progress and outcomes, as well as quantifiable metrics?
- Capacity to Execute
 - Does the application demonstrate the ability/capacity of the organization to meet the proposal's objectives and fiscal management responsibilities?
- Sustainability
 - What is the life of the project beyond the grant period?