

# ACROSS FENCE LINES

Connecting Corporate America to Communities  
through Urban and Community Forestry Programs



*Funded by the U.S. Forest Service*

## CASE STUDY

### CommuniTree Collective Impacts

Calumet Region (Northwestern Indiana and Northeastern Illinois)

#### Introduction

CommuniTree, a successful forestry collective based in northwest Indiana, has been sustained through diverse parties partnering according to the principals of the collective impact model, in which individuals and organizations from different sectors convene around a shared goal. The CommuniTree platform has accordingly served as an engagement mechanism, allowing businesses to initiate and participate in UCF efforts alongside municipalities, NGOs and nonprofits. In 2021, the platform facilitated extensive, WHC-led onboarding of new corporate industrial partners to leverage additional funding for urban forestry efforts. CommuniTree has already planted over 8,000 trees in communities in the region, along with over 2,000 trees on industrial lands, and new initiatives are underway to mitigate industrial impacts of pollution runoff, abate the urban heat island impact, alleviate air pollution, remediate soil contamination and conduct ecological restoration.

#### The Business Drivers

##### **Business Driver 12 - Employee Engagement**

Companies supporting CommuniTree activities identify employee engagement as a primary driver for ongoing participation.

##### **Business Driver 14 - Lands Management**

Businesses in the highly industrialized Calumet region often manage large-scale operations on sprawling campuses. While industrial stakeholders participate in efforts both on their own lands and in nearby communities, community efforts are often paired with planting on private, corporate owned lands.

##### **Business Driver 15 – Nature-Based Solutions**

Companies actively working to mitigate fugitive dust, alleviate heat island effects, promote resilience to floods or extreme climate events and reduce air pollution have engaged with CommuniTree to explore UCF's potential to address these challenges.

## **Alignment with Ten-Year Urban Forestry Action Plan Goals**

### **Goal 3 - Increase Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility in Urban and Community Forestry**

The Student Conservation Association is an active and founding member of CommuniTree. The organization trains youth from impacted areas in forest maintenance and prepares them for green jobs.

### **Goal 5 - Improve Urban and Community Forest Management, Maintenance, and Stewardship**

CommuniTree members convene regularly to share knowledge and problem-solve collectively, building a body of knowledge and expertise readily accessible to partners in need of management, maintenance and stewardship guidance.

### **Goal 6 - Diversify, Leverage, and Increase Funding for Urban and Community Forestry**

Overall, the CommuniTree has broadened the range of parties participating in UCF in the Calumet region. Engaging business partners as equal contributors to UCF efforts often results in increased investment in the efforts. Active engagement of employees also allows for leveraging of grant funds based on matching corporate contributions.

## **The Community**

With a long history of urbanization and industrial activity, the Calumet region faces a wide range of environmental threats. According to the EPA EJSCREEN tool, the region is in the nation's 70-80<sup>th</sup> percentile for Particulate Matter 2.5, the 95-100<sup>th</sup> percentile for proximity to a superfund site, the 80-90<sup>th</sup> percentile for proximity to hazardous waste and the 95-100<sup>th</sup> percentile for wastewater discharge.

Demographically, Calumet is in the 80-90<sup>th</sup> percentile in the nation for population of people of color and the 80-90<sup>th</sup> percentile for low-income populations. Low-income communities concentrated in areas with high density of pavement, like most of the Calumet region, experience more extreme heat island effects. According to the Chicago Region Trees Initiative, Calumet City, IL experiences temperatures up to 30 degrees higher than surrounding areas due to the urban heat island effect.

While the Calumet region has a long history of industrial development, the area is surprisingly rich in biodiversity. Fragmented remnants of rare and highly productive ecosystems like hemi-marsh, dune and swale, and tallgrass prairie still host a wide variety of plant and animal species. With the resulting intense interest from the conservation community, longstanding advocacy by the environmental justice community, and the often-competing priorities of industrial landowners, urban forestry projects carried out in this setting present a mutually beneficial tool for developing common ground.

## **Challenges**

While CommuniTree has found success in seeking grants to fund plantings, tree giveaways and education efforts, there is instability inherent to any funding strategy dependent on grants.

With political dynamics shifting rapidly and intensely between administrations, projects may be faced with sudden scarcity or conversely, be presented with unforeseen opportunities to rapidly scale up that are difficult to optimize on short notice. This uncertainty presents participants with challenges in planning for consistent and sustained action.

## Opportunities

**Expanding Regional Efforts** — Given CommuniTree’s successful history, new corporate and industrial partners now voluntarily engage with the collective, without the need for active recruitment. Corporations are driven to participate because of CommuniTree’s previous projects, the range of organizations involved in the effort and increasing community support for UCF efforts. While the initiative has been focused on the Indiana portion of the greater Calumet region, including industrial facilities adjacent to the Indiana Dunes National Park and urban-industrial neighborhoods in East Chicago, Hammond and Gary, consistent project success has prompted expansion into Illinois through engagement with new partners.

Engagement with new corporate and industrial partners continues, with CommuniTree currently developing partnerships with the following organizations to employ location-appropriate nature-based solutions

- **PVS Chemical Solutions:** Forestry applications are being explored to reduce runoff from an adjacent, uncapped toxic waste landfill and control invasive plants in sediment ponds along the Calumet River shoreline.
- **The Invert Chicago:** This new, underground transportation, warehouse and distribution center is slated for construction in Chicago’s southeast side in 2030. In anticipation of new environmental challenges, CommuniTree has formed a partnership with facility developers, which will result in a neighborhood-based effort to increase canopy and mitigate urban heat island effects, manage stormwater runoff and abate air pollution.
- **S.H. Bell Company:** Through work with CommuniTree, logistics company S.H. Bell is designing a project that will reduce fugitive dust and stormwater runoff and utilize tree plantings in residential areas to remediate soils contaminated by manganese and lead.
- **Illinois International Port District (IIPD):** Tree planting is well underway at IIPD office headquarters and by the entrance to the North American Stevedoring Company (NASCO) facility, located in the port’s Iroquois Landing terminal. A pre-restoration assessment of 7 acres of degraded woodland within the facility, along the Lake Michigan shoreline, is also in progress. Through this project, CommuniTree is advocating for reforestation and the management of existing woodland to address the increase in sediment runoff and fugitive dust expected to come with the construction of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers confinement unit within the Iroquois Landing area.<sup>1</sup>

**Building Bridges** — CommuniTree formed a partnership with an educational planting initiative at George Washington High School and the grassroots Southeast Youth Alliance in early 2021. Engagement with these community stakeholders has produced rare opportunities for positive collaboration between high-impact industrial parties and highly impacted communities to conduct solution-oriented activities.

**Assessing Broad Impacts** — CommuniTree’s sustained success has led to a gradual change in how regional business partners approach urban forestry and nature-based solutions. While this cultural shift has been difficult to measure, discussions around the sociocultural impacts of the initiative have led to the exploration of new technologies and platforms that could help quantify the effects of environmental activism and advocacy through a corporate lens.

### Partners

- Alderwoman Susan Garza, 10<sup>th</sup> Ward, Chicago
- Cleveland Cliffs Burns Harbor
- City of Gary, Indiana
- City of Hammond, Indiana
- City of East Chicago, Indiana
- City of Chicago Bureau of Forestry
- DePaul University
- Dunes Learning Center
- Evolved Group
- Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelly Foundation
- Illinois International Port District
- Indiana Department of Natural Resources
- Northern Indiana Public Service Company (NIPSCO)
- Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission
- PVS Chemicals
- Student Conservation Association
- S.H. Bell Company
- U.S. Forest Service
- Wildlife Habitat Council

### Key Takeaways

- Convening for collective impact has sustained and gradually grown CommuniTree’s efforts over time, and new partnerships continue to develop in an expanding geographic footprint. The collective uses UCF as the mechanism for a solution-oriented network of industrial and community stakeholders to convene.
- An established record of success with a diverse suite of partners across sectors and industries has created a self-sustaining feedback loop, with new project development stemming from CommuniTree’s partner network.

- CommuniTree’s network is expanding in scope, utilizing tree plantings alongside other forms of green infrastructure such as bioswales and soil remediation to promote nature-based solutions and pollution mitigation strategies in highly impacted communities.