

# Certified Urban and Community Forester Credential Aims to Elevate the Profession and Grow SAF

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**F**orest resources in urban, peri-urban, and wildland-urban interfaces are increasingly important to people and the environment. Over 8 in 10 Americans currently live in an urban area, and large expanses of forest land have been enveloped by urbanization in recent decades. Almost every municipality in the United States is grappling with the interconnected issues of housing shortages, climate change adaptation, and sustainable development. Increasingly, municipalities are looking to urban and community foresters for leadership and expertise on how to develop land responsibly and utilize trees to meet environmental goals and improve quality of life.

Urban and community forestry has emerged as a distinct profession that is grounded in the science and practice of traditional forestry, yet incorporates specialized skills related to urban soil science and ecology, arboriculture, land development, and public policy. For years, urban and community foresters have demonstrated their qualifications and competency through surrogate credentials borrowed from traditional forestry, arboriculture, and others. This patchwork of credentials has made it difficult to clearly communicate the expertise of urban and community foresters to the public and has hampered their professional identity and credibility among other professions vying to influence natural resource decision-making in urban areas.

Over the past decade, momentum has been building for urban and community forestry to codify and recognize its specialized expertise through a standalone credential. In 2013, SAF entered an agreement with the California Urban Forests Council to explore nationwide use of the state's urban and community forester certification. In 2020, SAF conducted a market analysis that showed demand and viability for a nationwide credential. Thereafter, credential development by SAF began in earnest, starting with a job task analysis to identify key competencies and culminating with creation of an exam to test those competencies in prospective credential holders.

The certification exam comprises seven knowledge domains that encompass thirty-seven distinct competencies. Certification exam development concluded in late 2023, and SAF began accepting exam applications from certification candidates in early 2024. The first cohort took the exam in April 2024, and since that time 60 professionals have passed the exam and earned the designation from SAF of Certified Urban and Community Forester. An update about the credential rollout was published in the August 2024 edition of [The Forestry Source](#).

Recognizing that urban and community forestry is a melting pot for educational and professional backgrounds, SAF has created three pathways for credential eligibility. Two pathways

are laid out for those possessing either a professional degree or technical degree. And a third pathway exists for those possessing no degree, but strictly professional experience in urban and community forestry. Each pathway requires a minimum number of years of applicable work experience to attain candidate status for the credential. Work experience requirements are lower with higher degree attainment in forestry or related fields. Five years is the minimum work experience to qualify for taking the exam. Details about eligibility criteria and exam application can be found on the [SAF Certification Page](#).

A significant investment has been made by SAF and over 50 subject matter expert volunteers to develop the Certified Urban and Community Forester credential. They have built it, now will they come? Early enthusiasm for the credential is promising, but growing the credential to a sustainable level will require broad-based advocacy and public recognition that the credential is a valued metric for discerning competency and professionalism in urban and community forestry.

So why should SAF foresters outside the urban realm cheer for this new credential? Here are a few reasons that come to mind for me. First, the credential is rigorous and very well designed. A very high bar has been set both for professional experience and knowledge competency, which will only be surpassed by those who are capable and committed practitioners of urban and community forestry. Second, the credential exposes SAF to a whole new demographic for membership and revenue. Historically, a minority of urban foresters have been SAF members or Certified Foresters, instead opting to affiliate with organizations and credentials in the arboriculture profession. As a result, this credential should be additive rather than duplicative to SAF's membership and credential holders. Third, the credential raises the visibility and credibility of SAF in urban areas. For better or worse, urban areas are centers of economic and political power. At a time, when rural resources may risk losing relevance to average Americans who overwhelmingly live in urban areas, urban and community foresters may be a vital linkage between the public and SAF's broader interests. Fourth, the credential legitimizes urban and community forestry as a distinct academic and professional pathway and identity. The body of knowledge is now defined and tangible. The profession can stand on its own and clarify its role in modern society. And finally, the credential stakes a claim to urban and community forestry subject matter expertise. Multiple professions intersect in the urban space and vie for influence over urban forest planning and management. This credential should give urban and community foresters a stronger voice to promote sound forestry practices as the urban century unfolds before us.