



UTAH
FOREST
RESTORATION
INSTITUTE

**ANNUAL
REPORT**
2025

UFRI

UTAH FOREST
RESTORATION
INSTITUTE



ABOUT

Utah's landscapes are shaped by wildfire and other natural disturbances that impact ecosystems and communities. The **Utah Forest Restoration Institute** (UFRI), based at Utah State University, provides relevant, timely, practical science about forest and fire management to improve the health of Utah's unique forests and woodlands. As Utah's central hub for science-based, actionable knowledge about forest management and restoration, UFRI serves as a bridge between science and implementation, and is a trusted source of information for managers, policymakers, and the public.

BACKGROUND

UFRI was created in 2024 and is funded through ongoing appropriations by the Utah State Legislature. In creating UFRI, the intent was to establish a state-of-the-art institute positioned to partner with and eventually join the network of Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI) that serve the states of Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR DIRECTOR

It is thrilling to write this letter for the Utah Forest Restoration Institute's very first annual report. At this time a year ago, UFRI had no staff, no space, and no projects. We were, however, busy laying the groundwork for launching, and over this past year we have grown from an idea into a reality.

Our forests and woodlands face serious challenges. Large, severe wildfires and other disturbances can have huge impacts on our communities. Making our forests and woodlands more resilient requires objective, science-based solutions, and we are grateful that the Utah Legislature entrusted UFRI with working toward those solutions.

We are also thankful for the strong support we have received from every level at USU, which has made the complex task of launching a new institute manageable. Finally, we are grateful for the enthusiasm we have received from partners across the state and beyond. We have heard many times that the launching of UFRI is timely (or overdue), that our work will add value to the state and the region, and that people are excited that we exist.

Now, with five professional staff members and several faculty partners and affiliates at USU, we have begun building partnerships, started working on science-management projects across the state, and outfitted two spaces on campus to house our employees and equipment. We had our first successful field season working with an amazing cohort of motivated undergraduate research technicians, and we even put the first scratches on our first truck.

In the coming year, we're looking forward to more of everything: more projects, more partnerships, more opportunities to share information where it matters most. As we shift from launching UFRI to delivering forest health science, we are optimistic and enthusiastic for the year to come.

Best wishes,



Table of Contents

MISSION AND VISION 4

CORE VALUES 5

CORE ACTIVITIES 6

OUR TEAM 7

INFRASTRUCTURE 13

SCIENCE 15

COLLABORATION 17

TRAINING & OUTREACH 18

WEBSITE 19

STATEWIDE ENGAGEMENT 20

LOOKING TOWARD 2026 21



La Sal Mountains, UT

OUR VISION

The Utah Forest Restoration Institute envisions healthy, resilient forests and woodlands that thrive in the face of environmental change, supported by the collaborative efforts of people, institutions, and communities in Utah.

OUR MISSION

The mission of the Utah Forest Restoration Institute is to collaboratively develop and deliver objective science to managers, policymakers, and communities to inform the management of healthy, fire-resilient, and climate-adapted forests and woodlands.

BUILDING UFRI

UFRI's inaugural year was marked by developing and articulating a clear mission and vision for the institute that are in keeping with the Utah State Legislature's intent; identifying interested partners and collaborators across the state and consulting with them on opportunities, critical issues, limitations, and obstacles to success; and building the human and physical infrastructure needed to implement programmatic activities in pursuit of UFRI goals.

CORE VALUES

SCIENCE-BASED

We rely on rigorous research to inform forest management and restoration policy and practice.

MANAGEMENT-FOCUSED

Our work is designed to support land managers with timely, practical, and actionable solutions that enhance forest resilience and promote long-term forest health.

SOLUTION-ORIENTED

We approach challenges with a proactive mindset, seeking innovative, effective, and sustainable pathways to successful forest management.

NEUTRAL & OBJECTIVE

Our work is driven by evidence, not advocacy.

COLLABORATIVE

We believe that strong partnerships and cooperation allow us to leverage resources and knowledge for the mutual benefit of all.

OPEN, TRANSPARENT, & COMMUNICATIVE

We foster accessibility and transparency by regularly engaging with partners, directly addressing needs and concerns, and sharing knowledge.

NIMBLE & RESPONSIVE

We adapt quickly to emerging policy, management, and research developments to ensure that we are relevant and effective.

VALUE-ADDED

We prioritize work that brings tangible benefits to the stewards of Utah's forests and woodlands, as well as the communities that depend on them.



Preparing biomass in a drying oven

CORE ACTIVITIES

SCIENCE

Utah's forests and woodlands have undergone dramatic change over the past century. The removal of fire, along with livestock grazing and logging by early Euro-American settlers, resulted in more uniform expanses of forests and woodlands. In some areas, woody fuels have built up over decades due to the absence of fire, mortality from drought or insects, and new vegetation growth. Many of our forests and woodlands are now at risk of widespread, damaging fire and other mortality factors. We develop and directly deliver science relevant to improving the health of Utah's forests and woodlands and transfer scientific concepts into practical action for Utah's forest managers.

COLLABORATION

We work with land managers, community members, and university partners to identify knowledge gaps, test and monitor ecosystem management strategies, and communicate about effective practices. Partnerships and collaborations represent the core pillar of how we work: our connections allow us to apply science to local problems and bring local expertise to a broader audience.

TRAINING & OUTREACH

We serve as a hub in Utah for practical information on the science and management of forests and woodlands in the state. We provide information to diverse audiences, including landowners and managers, policymakers, and community members. Having full-time staff dedicated to improving forest and woodland health in Utah allows us to spend time on the ground with land managers, learning from partners, and bringing information where it is needed. We also offer training opportunities for the next generation of natural resources managers.

OUR TEAM



**Larissa
Yocom**

Director



**Andreas
Leidolf**

Associate
Director



**Kelly
Griese**

Communications
Officer



**MarLyn
Hill**

Staff Assistant



**Eric
Behrens**

Research
Associate



**Ethan
Torres**

Research
Associate



**Ryan
Jess**

Senior Research
Technician



**Mike
Howe**

Affiliate
Faculty



**Jim
Lutz**

Faculty
Partner



**Justin
DeRose**

Faculty
Partner

LEADERSHIP

UFRI is led by its Director, Dr. Larissa Yocom, and Associate Director, Andreas (Andy) Leidolf, who joined the Institute in January and March of 2025, respectively.



Larissa Yocom

Director

Dr. Larissa Yocom is the Director of the UFRI as well as an Associate Professor of Fire Ecology in the Department of Wildland Resources at USU. Larissa grew up in Washington and earned a Ph.D. at Northern Arizona University. She is interested in advancing research on the ecological role of fire, how climate, fire, and vegetation influence each other over time and space, and how forest management can promote the beneficial aspects of fire and minimize its negative consequences. Her current research projects include assessing fuel treatment effectiveness in meeting management objectives in Utah, evaluating the climatic and environmental factors influencing tree regeneration after wildfire, and investigating the degree to which forest species composition affects fire behavior and effects.

Andreas (Andy) Leidolf is the Associate Director of UFRI. Previously, Andy served as Assistant Director and Project Administrator of iUTAH EPSCoR, a 6-year, \$24M research, training, education, and outreach program funded by the National Science Foundation to provide a secure water future for the state of Utah, and as Coordinator of the Utah State University Honors Program. He holds a B.S. degree, summa cum laude, in Forestry from Mississippi State University and a M.S. in Fisheries and Wildlife Ecology from USU. Over his 30-year career of conducting, transmitting, facilitating, and administering scientific research, Andy has acquired extensive experience in scientific communication, collaboration, and community management, including as an Inaugural Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science's Community Engagement Fellowship Program in Washington, D.C.



Andreas Leidolf

Associate Director

PROFESSIONAL STAFF

UFRI currently employs a staff assistant, a communications officer, a senior research technician, and two research associates.



MarLyn Hill

Staff Assistant

UFRI Staff Assistant MarLyn Hill started working with UFRI in September 2025 and provides administrative support to Institute leadership and assists with day-to-day operations and management. She ensures efficient execution of Institute processes and workflows; manages office and laboratory spaces; supervises student office assistants; and assists in the planning and implementation of travel, programmatic activities, and events.

MarLyn is a life-long people-person with a passion for helping others and socializing. She married into the natural resources field and is always asking her amazing husband to identify plants and birds. She has three great kids and is working to get her Master's degree in social work.

Communications Officer Kelly Griese provides strategic communication leadership to the Institute; creates and disseminates content for diverse audiences; leads UFRI media engagement efforts; and plans, develops, and implements media training for Institute staff.

Kelly joined the UFRI team in September 2025 as the Institute's Communications Officer. Her enthusiasm for providing valuable and accurate information to the public began at Ball State University, where Kelly studied telecommunications. Kelly has produced television news in Reno, Nevada, West Palm Beach, Florida, and Indianapolis, Indiana. She has two Emmys and a National Headliner Award recognizing her achievements in journalism. In addition to working as a news producer, Kelly held roles as an outreach coordinator for the Indiana Secretary of State and as a communications coordinator for the Global Center for Species Survival. She is an energetic advocate for the natural world with a passion for storytelling.



Kelly Griese

Communications Officer

UFRI Research Associates, Eric Behrens and Ethan Torres, use their expertise to assist or lead in planning, implementing, and/or supervising the Institute's growing portfolio of projects, including: establishing research and monitoring protocols; hiring, training, and supervising seasonal field crews; maintaining and servicing field and laboratory equipment and our vehicle fleet; analyzing, summarizing, and visualizing field data, including quality assessment/quality control; and providing GIS and mapping support.



Eric Behrens

Research Associate

Eric joined UFRI in September 2025 after working for two and a half years as a fire effects monitor with the National Park Service, where he monitored the effects of wildfires and prescribed fires in the Southern Plains and Rio Grande Valley. He has experience researching and monitoring plant community ecology in a variety of ecosystems from his previous work in the Northern Great Plains and the Great Lakes States. His primary interests are restoration ecology and fire ecology, especially as they pertain to projects that build ecosystem resilience to wildfire while providing fire risk protection to communities in the wildland-urban interface. He holds a Master's degree in Biology from the University of Nebraska Omaha and a BAS in Ecology and Systematics from the University of Northern Iowa.



Ethan Torres

Research Associate

Ethan, who started with UFRI in October 2025, recently completed a Master's degree at the University of Oregon, where he studied post-fire invasive species management using mycorrhizal fungi. Prior to completing his Master's degree, Ethan worked for five years as a research technician/assistant for Marquette University and the University of Oregon. He accrued experience in plant identification, surveying and monitoring plants and soils, and leading field research crews in both old-growth temperate rainforests and Great Basin sagebrush ecosystems. He is passionate about bridging science and practice to help all landowners and managers advance ecological restoration goals that benefit both lands and people.

Senior Research Technician Ryan Jess supports UFRI by providing technical expertise, operational support, and program development across the Institute's full range of activities. His work spans fieldwork planning, training, and safety, as well as operational and logistical support; website management; and consultation in the field of dendrochronology, including fire-scar sampling and dating and integration of tree-ring methods with UFRI's forest restoration research efforts.

Ryan has spent the last 14 years working as a dendrochronologist—first at the University of Alaska, where he managed the Tree Ring Research Laboratory for five years, and since early 2017 at Utah State University, managing the Tree Ring Science Center under the direction of Dr. Justin DeRose. He specializes in developing long-term tree-ring records to reconstruct past climate conditions, fire history, and other ecological disturbance processes. Outside of his professional life, Ryan loves spending time with his wife of 17 years, Sara, and their two wild, adventurous kids!



Ryan Jess

Senior Research Technician

AFFILIATE FACULTY & FACULTY PARTNERS

UFRI affiliate faculty and faculty partners contribute their expertise to inform the Institute's work.

Dr. Michael Howe is a forest entomologist and disturbance ecologist who is interested in understanding where, when, and how forest insect outbreaks occur, as well as their impacts on forested ecosystems. At USU, Mike's research focuses on how the population dynamics of forest insects are affected by climatic and global change and how forest insect outbreaks change forest structure, fuel loading, and wildfire dynamics. Outside of work, Mike likes to cross-country ski, mountain bike, run, and hike all over the Bear River Range.



Mike Howe

Affiliate Faculty



Jim Lutz

Faculty Partner

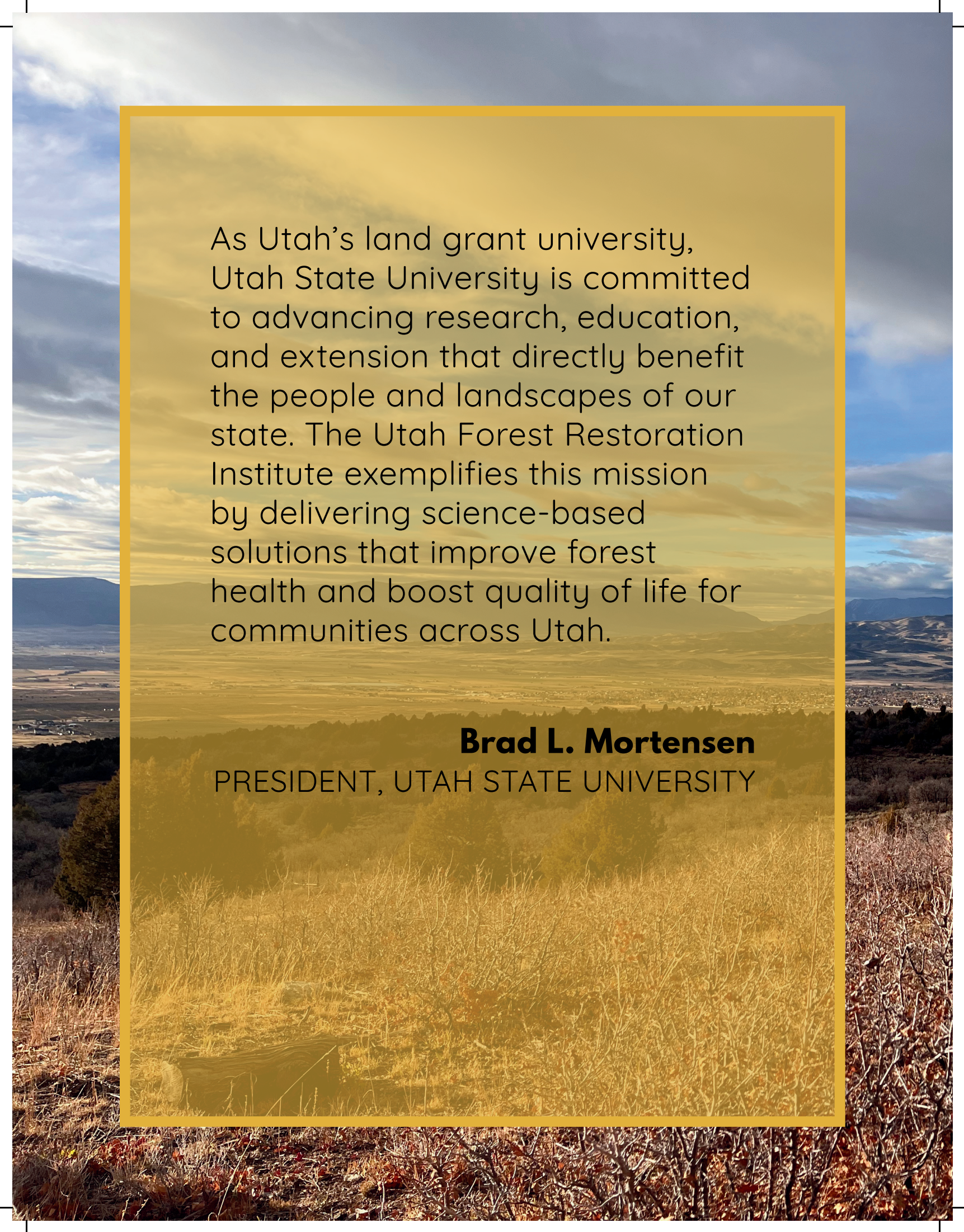
Dr. James Lutz is a Professor of Forest Ecology at the S.J. and Jessie E. Quinney College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at USU. He received his Ph.D. in Ecosystem Analysis from the University of Washington in 2008. Jim studies the ecosystems of western North America to contribute to science-based conservation and management of our natural resources in the face of changing climate and demography. His research interests mainly include the demography and spatial patterns of primary forests, especially the causes of tree death, and how fire shapes old-growth forest communities. Jim is the principal investigator for three Smithsonian ForestGEO 'big plots' in Yosemite National Park, the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, and Cedar Breaks National Monument.



Justin DeRose

Faculty Partner

Dr. Justin DeRose is an Associate Professor of Silviculture and Applied Forest Ecology at the S.J. and Jessie E. Quinney College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at USU. He advises the Forest Ecology and Management degree program and is involved in preparing students for careers in the profession of forestry and natural resources management. His research program focuses on better understanding forested ecosystems and developing management tools to build their adaptive capacity to climate change. He is interested in advancing research in forestry and forest management, including forest ecology, fire ecology, silviculture, stand dynamics, and carbon accounting in support of land management decision-making. He also studies natural disturbance ecology, including fires, bark beetle outbreaks, drought, invasive insects, and climate change effects.



As Utah's land grant university, Utah State University is committed to advancing research, education, and extension that directly benefit the people and landscapes of our state. The Utah Forest Restoration Institute exemplifies this mission by delivering science-based solutions that improve forest health and boost quality of life for communities across Utah.

Brad L. Mortensen
PRESIDENT, UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

INFRASTRUCTURE

With the support of USU's S.J. & Jessie E. Quinney College of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Department of Wildland Resources, UFRI has acquired and outfitted the physical space needed to carry out its administrative and work functions and to house its growing staff.



UFRI Administrative Office

ADMINISTRATION

The UFRI administrative office (NR 314) is located in the Natural Resources Building on USU's Logan main campus. This 515 ft², three-room suite provides office space for the Director (NR 314B), Staff Assistant (NR 314), and a state-of-the-art conference room (NR 314A) equipped with smart technology to facilitate virtual meetings.

Adjacent to the UFRI administrative office is the UFRI Associate Director's office (NR 320).

VISIT

If you happen to be on USU's main campus in Logan, you can find us in the Natural Resources Building (NR), Suite 314.

Mon 9am—12pm, 1pm—5pm
Tue 9am—5pm
Wed 9am—12pm, 1pm—5pm
Thu 9am—5pm
Fri 9am—5pm



LABORATORY & COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE

Starting with a 915 ft² blank canvas, UFRI's laboratory has been designed to provide office space for its research and communications staff and to serve as a collaborative workspace.



The space also features a GIS workstation, a Zoom room, and 80 ft² of storage for field equipment and supplies.

VEHICLE FLEET

Using one-time funds from the Utah State Legislature in 2024, UFRI purchased a field vehicle to support its research and monitoring activities. Since then, the Institute has added two additional field vehicles to its fleet. With this increased capacity, UFRI will be able to run multiple field crews simultaneously in 2026 to support our partners in their monitoring efforts of fuel reduction treatments and other management activities across the state.



CORE ACTIVITIES

SCIENCE

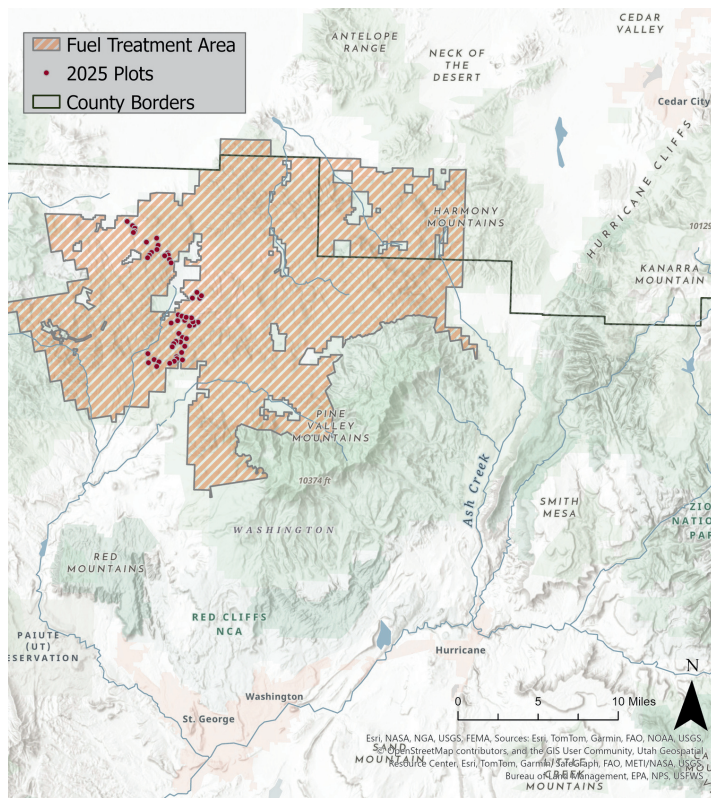
PINE VALLEY FUEL TREATMENT MONITORING

UFRI is working with the Pine Valley Ranger District of the Dixie National Forest as they embark on an ambitious, large-scale project to manage wildfire fuel loads over more than 100,000 acres of federal lands over the next several years. The Pine Valley Ranger District is a federally designated Wildfire Crisis Landscape, a high-risk fireshed where priority fuel reduction efforts will occur. Treatments are designed to reduce the risk of damaging wildfires and benefit nearby communities by protecting critical infrastructure, improving watershed health, supporting local industry, and protecting recreational opportunities.



Field site in Washington County, UT

In 2025, we installed 50 “pre-treatment” monitoring plots in pinyon-juniper woodlands near Highway 18. UFRI plots in the treatment area generated comprehensive data on plant community composition, invasive species presence, and fuel loading. Once these areas are treated, we will remeasure the plots to evaluate treatment success in meeting management objectives. We will also install additional plots in other areas in the coming years to help agency personnel compare the effectiveness of different potential treatment options, as well as document the landscape-scale changes to fire risk and plant communities that come with reducing fuel across a large area.



Map shows UFRI monitoring plots established in 2025 and the extent of the total fuel treatment area across the Dixie National Forest's Pine Valley Ranger District. Future UFRI plots will be established throughout the treatment area to assess the effectiveness of various fuel treatments.

ASSESSMENT OF TARGETED CATTLE GRAZING OF FUEL BREAKS IN CENTRAL UTAH

UFRI worked with a private landowner and USU extension agents to assess the effectiveness of long-term cattle grazing in maintaining an established fuel break in pinyon-juniper/Gambel oak woodland. This project is located in the wildland-urban interface in central Utah.

Pinyon-juniper and Gambel oak are two of the most common woodland types within Utah's wildland-urban interface. Many of the fuel breaks created in the state are within these woodlands and are designed to protect structures or reduce fire behavior.



UFRI Research Associate Ethan Torres works in the ungrazed portion of the fuel break in Sanpete County, UT



Cattle trail in the grazed portion of the fuel break in Sanpete County, UT

In late fall of 2025, our research staff collected fuel load and vegetation data on grazed and ungrazed portions of a fuel break established in 2013 near Mt. Pleasant and maintained annually by cattle grazing since then. This method of long-term, targeted grazing is a potentially low-cost option for maintaining low fuel loads that otherwise could contribute to rapid fire spread. Documenting the success of this project is an example of how UFRI can help bring local expertise and ideas to a wider audience.

COLLABORATION

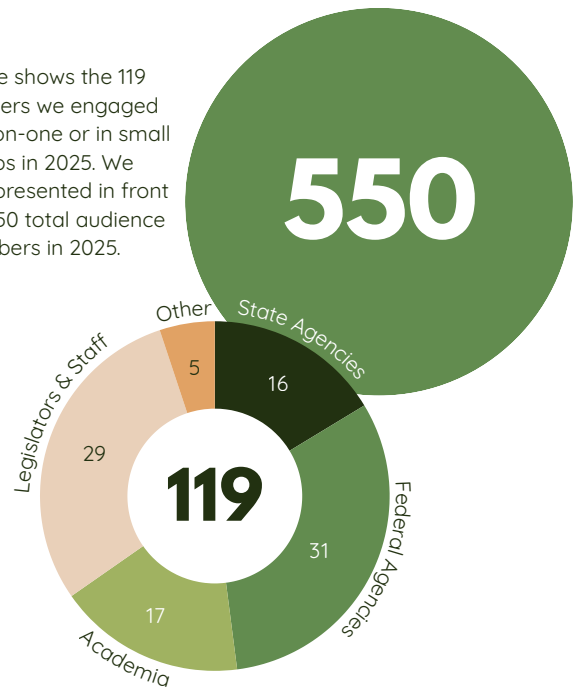
In April 2025, we hosted an in-person UFRI kick-off meeting for potential partners and collaborators in the Salt Lake City metro area. The more than 40 attendees included State Representative Casey Snider, as well as representatives from other federal and state elected officials' offices, the Shoshone Nation, Utah Forestry, Fire, and State Lands, Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, The Nature Conservancy, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, the Institute for Land, Water, and Air, and other entities at USU. After Rep. Snider presented a brief history of how UFRI was formed and our Director presented a vision for our future, Directors from the Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University, the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, and the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute spoke about the role they each play in their own state. We invited them to speak so attendees could hear examples of the kinds of activities and impacts UFRI hopes to have in the future here in Utah. After lunch, we facilitated a discussion about 1) information gaps in forest and fire management, 2) forest management practices and monitoring, and 3) challenges land managers face.



The discussion was highly productive and served as a first step in soliciting ideas for the gaps UFRI could fill in Utah.

In May 2025, we visited with agency personnel with the Dixie and Fishlake National Forests, including Forest Supervisors, and toured potential project areas. Both National Forests are planning to implement fuel reduction treatments over many thousands of acres in the coming years, and we discussed how UFRI can help with quantitative monitoring to determine which management options are most effective in meeting fire risk objectives as well as other goals.

Figure shows the 119 partners we engaged one-on-one or in small groups in 2025. We also presented in front of ~550 total audience members in 2025.



TRAINING & OUTREACH

As part of its commitment to training Utah’s next generation of forest management professionals, UFRI employed and trained seven undergraduate technicians in 2025.

Students received hands-on instruction and practical training—in field safety, general field techniques, and forest measurements—both at UFRI’s office and lab space at USU and across a number of field sites throughout the state.

UFRI also employed one USU undergraduate student as an office assistant, with the UFRI Staff Assistant providing mentorship and professional development.



Field technicians receiving training in the Pine Valley Ranger District



Maddi Baker
Office Assistant



Wilson Brown
Field Technician



Nephi Fillmore
Field Technician



Savannah Gleeson
Lab Technician



Eliza Hegewald
Field Technician



Jasper Jacobson
Field Technician



Isaiah Williams
Field Technician



Tyler Williams
Field Technician

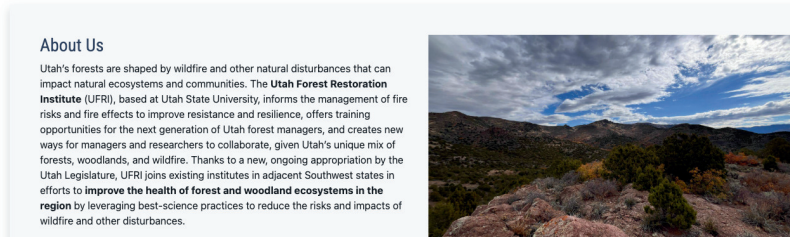
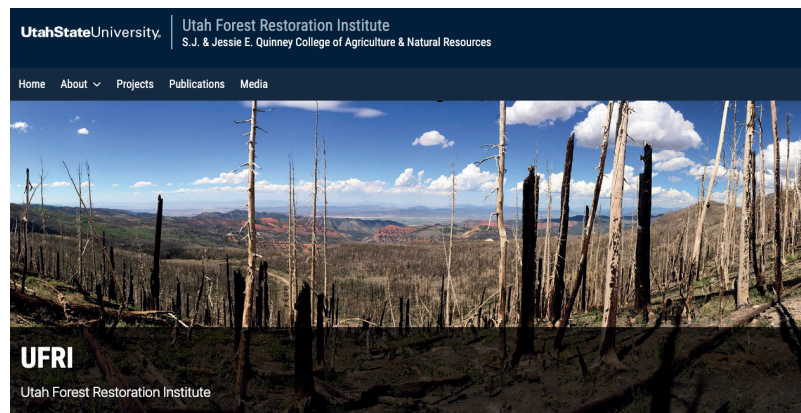


WEBSITE

In 2025, we overhauled the UFRI website. Our website serves as a hub for sharing the latest research, project updates, and resources with our partners and the public.

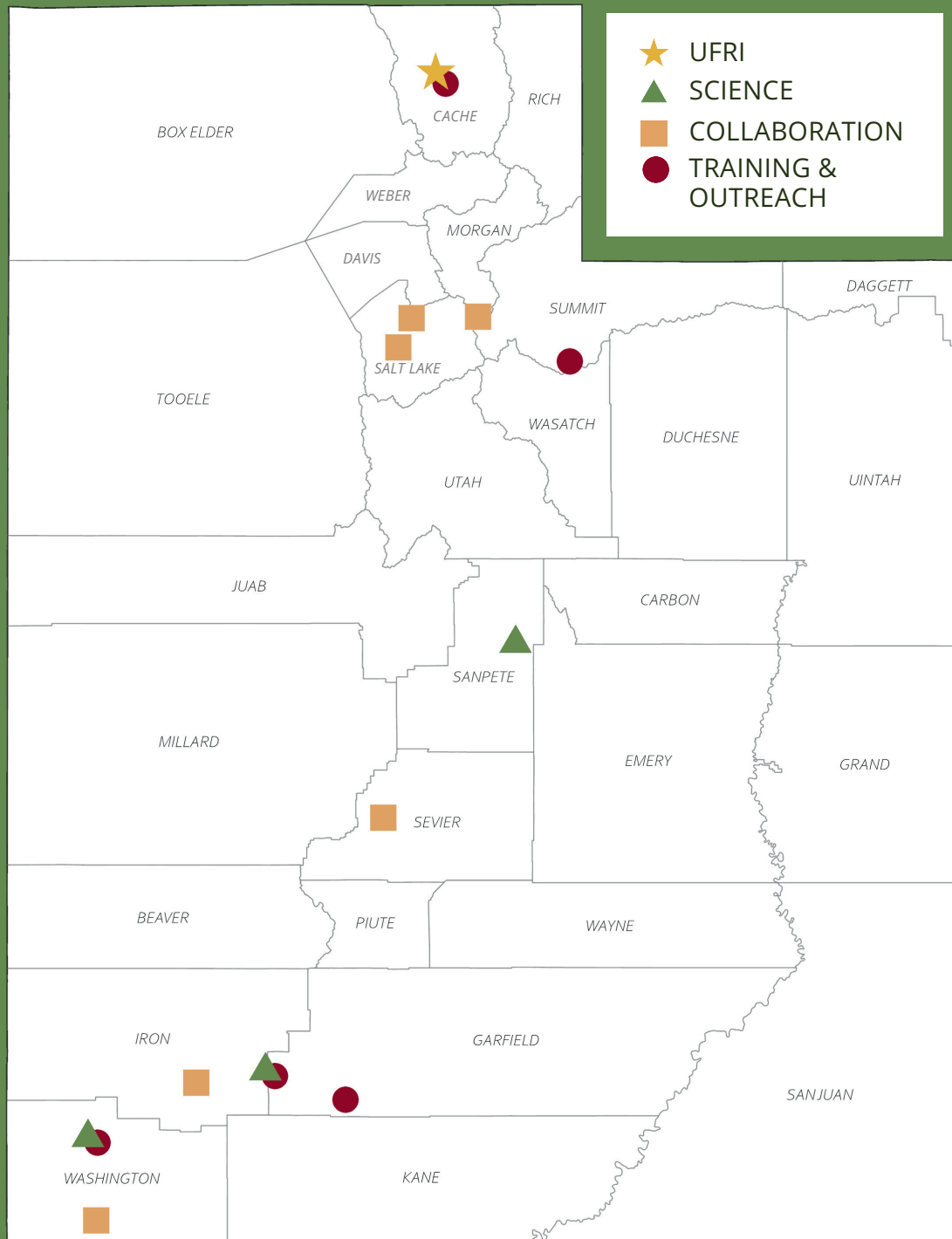
With its fresh look and user-friendly features, the site makes it easy to connect with our work, learn about our mission, and discover opportunities for collaboration.

We believe this digital platform will help us reach even more people and amplify our impact on forest health throughout Utah and beyond.



STATEWIDE ENGAGEMENT

In 2025, we held meetings with partners, trained technicians in field skills, and gathered data in multiple locations around the state of Utah.



LOOKING TOWARD 2026

As UFRI looks toward 2026, we will maintain our momentum by deepening and broadening the science we deliver, strengthening partnerships, and expanding our capacity to serve Utah's forest management community and public. In doing so, we aim to grow an Institute positioned for long-term impact.

SCIENCE

Monitoring of Fuel Treatment Effectiveness

We will expand data collection on the effectiveness of fuel treatments from pinyon-juniper to mixed-conifer forests to deepen our understanding of treatment effectiveness in meeting management objectives in these understudied systems. Our expanded vehicle fleet and increased field crew capacity will improve our ability to quickly deliver science outputs across the state.

Post-fire Treatment Monitoring

We plan to monitor selected recent post-fire treatments, including seeding, across Utah to gauge the effectiveness of management activities in meeting diverse objectives such as reducing post-fire erosion.

COLLABORATION

Expanding Agency Collaboration

In the coming year, we will build on our existing relationships with administrators and staff in federal and state agencies charged with stewardship of public lands. Staying in regular communication about emerging questions is critical for us to add value.

Expanding USU Collaboration

We will leverage the broad expertise in the newly merged S.J. and Jessie E. Quinney College of Agriculture and Natural Resources and hope to expand collaboration with other people and units at USU to advance UFRI's mission.

TRAINING & OUTREACH

Undergraduate Student Training

UFRI plans to expand the number of undergraduate students we train in field safety, general field skills, forest measurements, and forest management techniques.

Growing UFRI's Outreach Footprint

We will begin building a library of existing and new forest and fire science relevant to Utah on our website. Serving as a hub for practical, applicable information will be a key role for UFRI in the future.

ADMINISTRATIVE

Strategic Planning

In early 2026, UFRI's core team will begin a strategic planning exercise and seek input into a two-year work plan from our partners. We will also outline a process for ongoing evaluation and assessment of UFRI activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts.

Continuing to Build UFRI

With the foundation for our Institute laid, we will continue to involve the entire UFRI team in building an institutional culture, along with standardized workflows, operating procedures, and policies.



DIRECTOR
Larissa Yocom
larissa.yocom@usu.edu

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
Andreas Leidolf
andy.leidolf@usu.edu

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER
Kelly Griese
k.griese@usu.edu

THANK YOU

UFRI appreciates the partnership of numerous people and organizations:

- Utah State Legislature
- Utah State University
- Utah Forestry, Fire, and State Lands
- Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative
- Utah Division of Wildlife Resources
- Utah Department of Natural Resources
- Utah Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office
- The Nature Conservancy
- Bureau of Land Management
- U.S. Forest Service
- Institute for Land, Water, and Air
- Ecological Restoration Institute
- Colorado Forest Restoration Institute
- New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute

To obtain a physical copy of this report, please contact UFRI via email, phone, or letter.

Email
UFRI@usu.edu

Call
435-797-2730

Write
Utah Forest Restoration Institute
5230 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322-5230

UTAH FOREST RESTORATION INSTITUTE

5230 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322
435-797-2730
UFRI@usu.edu
qanr.usu.edu/ufri

