

UW-Stevens Point: State grant helps UW-Stevens Point, partners meet forestry workforce needs

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Addressing a need for skilled workers in the forestry industry, the Wisconsin Forestry Center at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point will receive a state grant of up to \$8 million. This Workforce Innovation Grant will support education and create a pipeline to forestry careers for the next generation.

Gov. Tony Evers announced the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. grant at UW-Stevens Point Tuesday, June 21. It will fund a Forest Industry Workforce Recruitment and Development Initiative, led by the Wisconsin Forestry Center of the College of Natural Resources in collaboration with industry, education, economic development partners across the state.

It is the largest state grant awarded to UW-Stevens Point in recent history.

“As the largest undergraduate forestry program in the nation, the College of Natural Resources has a long history of leading and supporting our natural resources and forestry partners,” said Brian Sloss, dean of the college at UW-Stevens Point. “We do all we can to provide the traditional four-year skilled professional, but our state industry needs more. This program is our direct response to that need.”

Based on surveys and industry reports, employers in all aspects of forestry have an urgent need for skilled workers, particularly entry level workers. The logging and forest products sector is among the top 10 employers in 31 counties in Wisconsin, and No. 1 in 10 counties.

“This grant will address a critical and pressing issue within Wisconsin’s forest industry,” said Les Werner, forestry professor and director of the Wisconsin Forestry Center at UW-Stevens Point.

Lead author of the grant proposal, Werner said this innovative approach focuses on people, partners and pathways.

High school students at Antigo, Menominee Indian, Merrill, Rhinelander and Tomahawk will be able to hands-on classes through their forestry education program leading to certified skill development for workforce entry. A one-week immersive training program will also be offered at Treehaven, the UW-Stevens Point field station in Tomahawk.

The grant will support post-high school training programs available through regional training hubs that will lead to stable, well-paying jobs. FORward mobile units featuring sawmill and timber harvesting simulators, a portable sawmill and kiln and forestry tools will be used statewide for public outreach, K-12 education and professional development. The state’s only start-to-finish wood products training center will include a state-of-the-art sawmill complex and mill simulator.

Each program will prepare participants for the workforce or provide credit toward additional training. Certificates will be credit-eligible at Nicolet College, Northcentral Technical College and UW-Stevens Point. Pathways to this ongoing professional development helps advance careers, Werner noted.

“A pathway to living wage jobs and futures that provide for their families and our state, this is the purpose of our program and the shared vision of our diverse array of partners,” Sloss said.

The Workforce Innovation Grants will provide additional training resources to Wisconsin’s forest product industries, said Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes. “By targeting both workers who need help getting back into the job market or developing their skills and young people just starting their careers, we’re building a workforce that will meet our immediate

and long-term needs.”

“There is no one-size-fits-all in workforce development,” Evers said. “We’re working to address our state’s long-standing workforce challenges by investing in retaining and recruiting our talented workers, making sure our kids have skills and apprenticeship opportunities, and reducing barriers to Wisconsinites who want to join our workforce.”

UW-Stevens Point Chancellor Tom Gibson, Sloss and Werner thanked partners who will be involved in implementing this initiative. In addition to the educational partners mentioned, they are:

- American Transmission Company
- Board of Commissioners of Public Lands
- Cleereman Industries
- Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association
- Grow North
- Kretz Lumber Co., Inc.
- Menominee Tribal Enterprises
- Milwaukee Tool
- New North
- Ponsse North America
- Tigerton Lumber Co.
- University of Wisconsin-Madison, Division of Extension
- Wisconsin Chapter of the Society of American Foresters
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources