

April 17, 2026

USDA Forest Service

Community Wood Energy and Wood Innovation Program
Forest Service Grant Programs (FS-1500-0051)
Washington, D.C.

Re: Letter of Support: East Montpelier Community Wood Energy Grant Application (FS-1500-0051)

Dear Review Committee:

I write in strong support of the Town of East Montpelier's application to the USDA Forest Service Community Wood Energy and Wood Innovation Program. I offer this support both in my professional capacity with the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FPR) and from the perspective of someone who has spent a career in Vermont, across the United States, and internationally — working at the intersection of sustainable forest management, watershed health, and renewable energy. The Town of East Montpelier's initiative represents exactly the kind of locally rooted, ecologically grounded, and economically meaningful transition that this program was designed to catalyze.

The Courage to Convert — and Why It Matters for the Forest Economy

Vermont's working forests are one of our greatest assets — ecologically, economically, and culturally. But a healthy forest economy does not sustain itself on timber markets alone. The long-term viability of sustainable forest management in Vermont depends on robust, diversified demand for wood fiber at every scale: sawlogs, pulp, and the low-grade material that feeds the wood energy market. When that demand weakens, the economics of active forest management weaken with it, and forests that should be actively stewarded are instead left unmanaged, often to the detriment of both ecological health and rural livelihoods.

This is where communities like East Montpelier play a role that is easy to underestimate. When a town, a farm, or a community institution makes the decision to convert from oil to advanced wood heat — to install a pellet boiler or a wood chip system and commit to sourcing fuel from Vermont producers — it is not simply making an energy decision. It is making a market. It is generating the steady, predictable, local demand for wood pellets and chips that gives forest landowners, loggers, and wood processors the confidence to invest in sustainable harvesting operations. It is helping to close the economic loop that keeps Vermont's forests productive, well-managed, and financially viable for the families and communities that depend on them.

That transition takes courage. It requires municipal leadership willing to make the case for a new technology. It requires landowners and farmers willing to take on change. It requires the community infrastructure — technical support, financing, and trusted suppliers — to

make the switch feel manageable. And it requires, in most cases, exactly the kind of targeted federal investment that East Montpelier is seeking here. The upfront cost of advanced wood heat systems remains the primary barrier to adoption, and grant programs like this one are not a subsidy for the already-committed — they are the catalyst that moves willing communities from intention to action.

A Vermont Perspective on Wood Energy and Forest Stewardship

In my work with FPR since 2023, and with the Agency of Natural Resources more broadly since 2019, I have seen firsthand the connection between wood energy demand and the health of Vermont's forest economy. Vermont's pellet and chip producers — including operations serving communities like East Montpelier — are a critical link in the chain between the forest and the building. When they have reliable customers, they can operate efficiently, pay competitive prices to harvesters, and support the active management of forestland that benefits wildlife, water quality, and carbon storage. When customers are scarce, that chain frays.

My earlier work with federal agencies for over twenty years on sustainable forest management programs across the United States and in Africa reinforced for me a principle that holds everywhere: forest economies that lack domestic demand for their products do not sustain healthy forests. Demand is the foundation. Communities that commit to wood heat — especially at the scale and visibility of a municipal initiative — demonstrate to their neighbors, their region, and their state that this transition is possible, practical, and worth pursuing. East Montpelier has the opportunity to be that demonstration community for central Vermont.

Endorsement

The Town of East Montpelier has demonstrated thoughtful planning in developing this application. The project targets a meaningful mix of residential and community-scale installations, prioritizes Vermont-sourced fuel, and engages a farming community that has both the need and the genuine interest to make this transition — if supported by the capital investment this grant would provide. The project is well-scoped, technically grounded, and aligned with both Vermont's energy goals and the USDA Forest Service's objectives for building community wood energy markets.

I encourage the review committee to look favorably on this application. Towns like East Montpelier — small, rural, forest-surrounded, and willing to lead — are where the transition to advanced wood heat will be won or lost. The forest economy needs its demand. The climate needs its carbon accounting. And their residents and farmers need the energy security and cost savings that wood heat can deliver. This grant helps make all of that possible. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Oliver Pierson
Director, Division of Forests and State Forester
Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation