

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

March 17, 2009

## A Race to Be the First to Use Stimulus Money

By [JENNIFER STEINHAUER](#)

LOS ANGELES — Emotions were running high on Monday in the San Bernardino National Forest. The first shovel, held in the hands of the first set of workers, made its way into the first bit of ground broken for the “first project” financed by the federal stimulus bill.

Well maybe not the first project — that was claimed by Missouri for work on a dilapidated bridge. And people in Nebraska and Maryland insist that they received the first official approval to patch up some roadways.

But the California Conservation Corps gets first dibs on the implement. “Our project is definitely the first one to use shovels,” said Jimmy Camp, a spokesman for the agency, which on Monday had 18 workers tackling trail work in the San Bernardino National Forest, about 70 miles east of here.

Americans love a first; historical, scandalous or banal. Now cities and states are rushing to be first in using the stimulus money — press release in hand — even for projects long in the making, with workers more or less standing by, pick axes akimbo, waiting for the check to clear so they can claim their title.

In early March, Representative Chris Van Hollen, Democrat of Maryland, announced that his state’s \$2.1 million worth of road resurfacing in Montgomery County was “the first project in the nation approved by the Federal Highway Administration.”

But on Feb. 17, the very day the stimulus bill was signed into law by [President Obama](#), work on a bridge a near Tuscumbia, Mo., began, with a competing claim of first.

“Within a few minutes of President Obama signing the bill,” said Shane Peck, a spokesman for the Missouri Department of Transportation, “the highway department approved that project, and construction started on the project.”

Backhoe, not shovel, but take that, Old Line State!

Not to overlook the claim in Nebraska, where state officials insist that they were first to put out requests for bids on seven road projects. “We did let our bids first,” said Mary Jo Oie, a spokeswoman for the Nebraska Department of Roads. “Before the president had even signed, we were looking at our deliverable projects.”

Part of the confusion, to the extent that it exists, centers on the definition of “first.”

“The concept of ‘shovel ready,’ which is neither a legal term nor a term of art in road construction, means projects ready to be started as soon as money becomes available,” said Jim Berard, a spokesman for the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

While the committee keeps no official tabs, that definition leads to one conclusion, Mr. Berard said. “I think Missouri has the best claim to the title,” he declared.

On that bit of news, Ms. Oie did her version of a phone shrug: “We’re excited any which way you look at it.”

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company

---

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)