

Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR Land Acquisition

Request for Funding Form Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council Fiscal Year 2011

Program or Project Title: Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR Land Acquisition

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	Council Funding Request	Out-Year Projections of Needs		
Funds Requested (\$000s)	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014
Outdoor Heritage Fund	\$3,500,000	0	0	0

A. Summary

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will permanently protect remnant native prairie and associated wetland complexes in western Minnesota by purchasing fee title properties and habitat easements. Lands purchased through this program will become units of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge. The majority of the lands protected will consist of native prairie, however, restoration of wetlands and grasslands will also be completed where needed.

B. Background Information

What is the problem or opportunity being addressed?

The purpose of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR is to preserve, restore, and manage a portion of the remaining critical northern tallgrass prairie habitat and associated habitats at widespread locations throughout the western Minnesota and northwestern Iowa historic range. Only 5 percent of the original tallgrass prairie remains for preservation consideration throughout the entire historic tallgrass prairie range. Native prairie declines of 99.9% and 99.6% have occurred in Iowa and Minnesota, respectively. Grassland dependent bird species have shown steeper, more consistent, and geographically more widespread declines than any other group of North American birds.

The Service has specific trustee responsibilities for migratory birds, endangered species, interjurisdictional fish, certain marine mammals, and lands administered by the Service.

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This refuge is a new way for the Service to cooperatively meet its trustee responsibilities within the tallgrass prairie landscape. The Service works with individuals, groups, and governmental entities to preserve tracts of northern tallgrass prairie.

What action will be taken?

Our program will protect, in perpetuity, native prairie tracts in western Minnesota. Fee title tracts will be the top priority for the funding. Funding will be used for the purchase of habitat easements if the funding cannot be used entirely on fee title tracts. The funding will purchase approximately 1200 acres of native prairie in fee title, 2300 acres of habitat easements, or a combination of the two. Lands protected will be within the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Habitat Preservation Area (HPA) in western Minnesota and will become units of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR.

Who will take action and when?

The Service will be responsible for all land acquisition activities associated with this program. However, partners, including the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy, will be consulted when selecting potential properties.

How will you coordinate this program with the other Constitutional Funding?

Other Constitutional funding will not be involved in this program.

What specific habitat changes will occur if this item is funded? Be specific about and list multiple benefits if they exist.

If this project is funded, the Service will protect approximately 1200 acres of native prairie through fee title acquisition or 2300 acres through the purchase of habitat easements or a combination of both fee title and easement acquisition. Lands protected will be within the 48-county Northern Tallgrass Prairie HPA in western Minnesota as described in the Final Environmental Impact Statement for this refuge.

When do you expect to see these habitat changes?

Habitat changes will occur one to two years after the acquisitions are finalized.

Will your Outdoor Heritage Fund dollar request complete the planned accomplishments?

YES x **NO**

If not, how will you finance completion?

The Outdoor Heritage funding will be used for the acquisition of fee title properties and habitat easements. Needed restoration of these properties will be funded through annual Service operations funding, as well as grants from numerous partners.

How will you pay for the maintenance of the accomplishments?

Long term costs for restoration, management, and wildlife and habitat monitoring will be funded through federally appropriated refuge operations funding.

How does this action directly restore, enhance, or protect prairies, wetlands, forests or habitat for fish, game, and wildlife?

This project will fund the permanent protection of approximately 1,200-2,300 acres of native prairie and the associated wetland complexes through land acquisition.

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If you are restoring or enhancing property, is the activity on permanently protected land?

☒ **YES** ☐ **NO**

If yes briefly describe the kind of protection.

All lands acquired through this program will become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System and administered by the Service.

How will you ensure transparency and provide information about your work and use of Outdoor Heritage Fund dollars.

All information requests will be addressed immediately. All actions associated with this program will be open for public review.

Why will this strategy work?

The Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR was established in September 2000 to address the loss of America's grasslands and mounting evidence indicating that many grassland species populations had precipitously declined as the prairies had vanished. One of the primary ways to reverse this decline is to permanently protect, restore and manage the native prairie tracts that remain. The Service utilizes landscape level planning tools produced by our HAPET office in Fergus Falls, MN and the MN County Biological Survey to strategically identify properties for acquisition.

Who might make decisions that assist or work against achieving the expected impact program?

When reviewing potential properties, Service employees will work with MN Department of Natural Resources staff to determine the biological integrity of the property. All fee title and easement lands will be purchased from willing sellers. This project also went through a public review process during the development of the Final Environmental Impact Statement.

If this is acquisition of land, has the local government formally approved the acquisition?

☒ **YES** ☐ **NO**

Local MN DNR and USDA offices will be contacted regarding potential fee title/easement purchases to determine if any ongoing programs will affect acquisition. Acquisition goals have also gone through a public review process which occurred during the development of the Final Environmental Impact Statement.

If this is fee simple acquisition of land, is the land free of any other permanent protection such as a conservation easement?

☒ **YES** ☐ **NO**

In the majority of the cases, yes, however, in some situations, proposed fee title tracts may have small areas that are encumbered by some sort of existing conservation easement.

If this is an easement acquisition, will the eased land be open for public use?

☐ **YES** ☒ **NO**

If Yes what kind of use?

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The fee title properties will be open to hunting and other public uses including wildlife observation, interpretation, photography, and environmental education. The properties where habitat easements are purchased will stay in private ownership and therefore will not be open for public use unless that landowner authorizes those uses.

If easement acquisition, will the easement be a permanent conservation easement as described in MS 2009, Chapter 84C.01, specifically protecting the natural resource values of real property forever?

☒ **YES** ☐ **NO**

If you are proposing funding for a new or ongoing program how long into the future do you expect this program to operate?

☒ **in perpetuity** ☐ **Years**

1. Which planning sections will you work in? Check all that apply in the list below.

- ☐ Northern Forest
- ☐ Forest/Prairie Transition
- ☐ Southeast Forest
- ☒ Prairie
- ☐ Metropolitan Urbanizing Area

2. Does the request address an urgent conservation opportunity that will be lost if not immediately funded?

☒ **YES** ☐ **NO**
If yes, please explain.

The decline of native prairie communities continues throughout Minnesota. The Service has been limited on the number of acres purchased annually due to funding limitations since the establishment of this refuge. Our current land acquisition budget cannot keep up with the landowner interest in this program.

3. Does the request restore and/or enhance habitat on existing state-owned Wildlife or Aquatic Management Areas or Scientific and Natural Areas?

☐ **YES** ☒ **NO**
If Yes, list the names of the AMAs, WMAs and/or SNAs and the acres to be restored and/or enhanced.

4. Is this request based on assessment through a science based strategic planning and evaluation model similar to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's Strategic Habitat Conservation model?

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☒ **YES** ☐ **NO**

If yes explain the model briefly.

The lands that will be purchased will be evaluated and prioritized utilizing the Service's Strategic Habitat Conservation model and other tools described below.

5. Explain the scientific foundation for your project, and the benefits it will produce.

The basic goals of the Service's Strategic Habitat Conservation are: 1) accomplish landscape level planning based on quantifiable objectives, 2) implement planned actions, then, 3) evaluate your actions to see if they are addressing your objectives. This is what our HAPET office in Fergus Falls does for the Service and our partners in the prairies of Minnesota. The Service's HAPET office does landscape level planning to meet specific wildlife objectives and conducts evaluation activities (i.e. 4sq.mi. surveys), to see if we/partners activities are meeting our objectives. The planned actions to be implemented through this grant application are the acquisition and restoration of converted wetland and grassland habitats. Based on HAPET evaluation strategies, modeling predictions can be made on the numbers of nesting waterfowl, grassland nesting birds, and pheasants the acres affected by this grant application will produce. Besides the obvious wildlife benefits, once restored, the lands acquired through this grant will provide additional water quality, groundwater recharge, and flood abatement benefits.

6. How do you set priorities? (Be sure to list the criteria you use and the weight you give each one.)

Potential acquisition properties are evaluated and weighted using the factors found on the **Evaluation Factors Matrix** from the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR Interim Comprehensive Conservation Plan and seen on Page 6. The evaluation factors were developed to help determine if and how a particular site meets the project goals that advance Service trustee responsibilities. The Northern Tallgrass Prairie Habitat Preservation Area project goals are:

- 1.) **Site Quality** - Preserve remaining remnants of native tallgrass prairie to ensure protection of unique plant communities, native fish and wildlife, and historic and cultural sites.
- 2.) **Management & Restoration Suitability** - Restore native fish and wildlife and their habitats, including:
 - Enhancement of some of the best remaining degraded remnants of tallgrass prairie through management practices (burning, grazing, etc.) and inter-planting or seeding of native plant species. Associated natural wetland habitats including prairie wetlands (potholes), fens, wet prairie, and riverine areas could be enhanced as well.
 - Restoration (reconstruction) of areas of tallgrass prairie using native plant species to buffer or interconnect remnant native prairie tracts.
- 3.) **Community Type Distribution** - Conserve, manage, and restore the biodiversity and abundance of native fish and wildlife populations.
- 4.) **Public Use, Recreation, Education** - Provide public areas for compatible fish and wildlife oriented recreation and educational opportunities to increase public understanding of the tallgrass prairie.

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Evaluation Factors Matrix - In order for a site to be selected it must obtain a minimum rank greater than 0 in goals numbered 1 or 2.

Goals	Excellent (4 points)	Good (3 points)	Fair (2 points)	Poor (1 points)	(0 points)	# pts	Wt.	Rank
1.) Site Quality	likely to have a full complement of species and appears to have structure and composition relatively free of disturbance by modern humans	has full complement of species, but experienced light to moderate levels of disturbance & relative abundance of some species may be altered	moderate to low diversity of native prairie species, significant population of exotic and/or weedy species resulting from moderate disturbance	heavily disturbed site with little remaining of the original community structure and composition, low native species diversity, exotics and weeds dominant	native prairie species not found on site		3	
2.) Management and Restoration Suitability	easy to manage, or restore as a remnant/ buffer/corridor	relatively easy to manage, or restore as a remnant/ buffer/corridor	difficult to manage, or restore as a remnant/ buffer/corridor	very difficult to manage, or restore as a remnant/ buffer/corridor	not suitable for management, or restoration as a buffer/corridor		1	
3.) Community Type Distribution	community type under represented & poorly distributed throughout project area or Federal Endangered/ Threatened Species is present	community type moderately represented and moderately distributed throughout project area	community type fairly represented and fairly distributed throughout project area and may not be an endemic community	community type well represented and fully distributed throughout project area and may not be an endemic community	does not contain native prairie community type		2	
4.) Public Use, Recreation, Education	strong community interest and easily accessible site		moderate community interest and moderately accessible site		lacking community interest & poor site accessibility		1	

Total _____

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C. Relationship to the *Minnesota Conservation and Preservation Plan* and Other Published Resource Management Plans

The Minnesota Conservation and Preservation Plan recommends protecting priority land habitats. This proposal will protect and restore priority native grasslands and their associated wetlands important to grassland dependent wildlife, especially grassland and wetland birds. This proposal will also implement the following habitat recommendations within the plan:

1. Improve connectivity and access to outdoor recreation - All fee title lands acquired and restored will be open to the public for hunting and other activities allowed under the National Wildlife Refuge System.
2. Keep water on the landscape – by protecting and restoring grasslands, this proposal will help keep water on the landscape (permanent vegetation restoration).

The need for this project is outlined in the ***Northern Tallgrass Prairie Habitat Preservation Area Final Environmental Impact Statement***, US Fish and Wildlife Service 1998. The primary purpose of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie HPA is to preserve and enhance the remaining remnant tracts of northern tallgrass prairie and aspen parklands habitats within Iowa and Minnesota.

A secondary purpose is to link existing prairie tracts together (Federal, state, tribal, private organization, and private landowner ownerships) into larger blocks plus buffer remnant prairie. This will establish larger, more viable units of managed prairie and allow travel corridors for wildlife. Prairie restoration used to link existing prairies together would utilize the same techniques used in managing existing prairies.

D. Budget

Budget Item	Fiscal Year 11	Fiscal Year 12	Fiscal Year 13
Personnel			
Contracts			
Equipment/Tools/Supplies			
Fee Acquisition	\$3,500,000 *		
Easement Acquisition	\$3,500,000 *		
Easement Stewardship			
Professional Services			
Travel			
Additional Budget Items			
TOTAL	\$3,500,000		

* Funding will be used to purchase lands in fee title (top priority), purchase habitat easements, or a combination of the two acquisition authorities.

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E. Personnel Details *In the space below list the names, titles and anticipated program funds to be paid by this recommendation. If you will need to fill a position just list the title and amount.*

Title	Name	Amount.
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Not applicable

F. All Leverage In the table below list the sources and amounts of leverage you anticipate by fiscal year you anticipate receiving it. Include state and non-state leverage.

Source of Non-State Leverage	Fiscal Year 11	Fiscal Year 12	Fiscal Year 13
Land and Water Conservation Fund	\$500,000		
Service Realty/Refuge Personnel Costs	\$47,000		
Service Appraisal, Survey, and Title Costs	\$45,000		
Service restoration and management costs	\$75,000		
TOTAL	\$667,000		

G. Outcomes:

- 1) In the first table below, quantify the outcomes you plan to achieve with the recommended funds.
- 2) In the second table show list the sections where outcomes will occur.
- 3) In the third table, allocate your recommended funds to each cell with outcomes listed in table 1.
- 4) In the fourth table show the leverage to be applied to each cell with outcomes listed in table 1.
and
- 5) If you have any outcomes listed in the “protect” row in table 1, account for them according to the type of acquisition and PILT status in table 5

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Table 1 Accomplish- ments	Wetlands	Prairies	Forests	Habitats for Fish, Game and Wildlife
Restore				
Protect		<i>Protect 1200 acres of prairie in fee title or 2300 acres in easement, or a combination of the two acquisition authorities.</i>		
Enhance				

Table 2 Sections Impacted and Impact Quantifier	Wetlands	Prairies	Forests	Habitats for Fish, Game and Wildlife
Restore				
Protect		<i>1,200-2,300 acres</i>		
Enhance				

Table 3 Recommend Fund Allocation	Wetlands	Prairies	Forests	Habitats for Fish, Game and Wildlife
Restore				
Protect		<i>\$3,500,000</i>		
Enhance				

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Table 4 Leverage \$	Wetlands	Prairies	Forests	Habitats for Fish, Game and Wildlife
Restore		<i>\$75,000</i>		
Protect		<i>\$592,000</i>		
Enhance				

Table 5 Acquisition Data	Wetlands	Prairies	Forests	Habitats for Fish, Game and Wildlife
Acquired in Fee with State PILT Liability				
Acquired in Fee without State PILT Liability		<i>Approximately 1200 acres of prairie for \$3,500,000 or a combination of the two acquisition authorities.</i>		
Permanent Easement		<i>Approximately 2,300 acres of prairie for \$3,500,000 or a combination of both fee and easement.</i>		

H. Accomplishment Time Table Using the headings below, include a clear statement of how much of what is being accomplished and when. Attach a map showing where accomplishments are anticipated. Accomplishments should clearly restore, enhance or protect forests, wetlands, prairies and habitat for fish, game and wildlife.

Milestone	Date	Measure
Identify priority acquisitions (fee and easement) properties	October 30, 2009	14 potential
Appraisals ordered	July 31, 2010	5 appraisals
Easement Options finalized	December 31, 2010	8 options
Purchase agreements (fee title) finalized	June 30, 2011	3 options
Grassland restoration completed	December 31, 2013	5 sites

I. Relationship to Your Current Budget

Since 2000, the Service has received annual appropriations of approximately \$500,000 in Land and Water Conservation Funds to acquire lands for the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR. This annual funding has allowed the Service to purchase smaller sized tracts of prairie during the last 9 years. The addition of Outdoor Heritage Funds will greatly increase our ability to protect larger tracts of native prairie throughout the 48 Minnesota Counties in the HPA.

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J. How Will the Habitat Improvements Be Sustained?

Outdoor Heritage Funds will be used to purchase the land in fee title or purchase perpetual habitat easements. The land purchased will become units of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR. Long term costs for restoration, management, and wildlife and habitat monitoring will be funded through annual refuge operations funding. Service habitat easements are perpetual and managers will work with landowners to maintain and, where needed, restore the native prairie on each tract of land.

Revenue sharing payments (in lieu of taxes) will be made for all fee title lands in accordance with federal law. Habitat easement purchases do not impact property taxes as they remain the responsibility of the landowner.

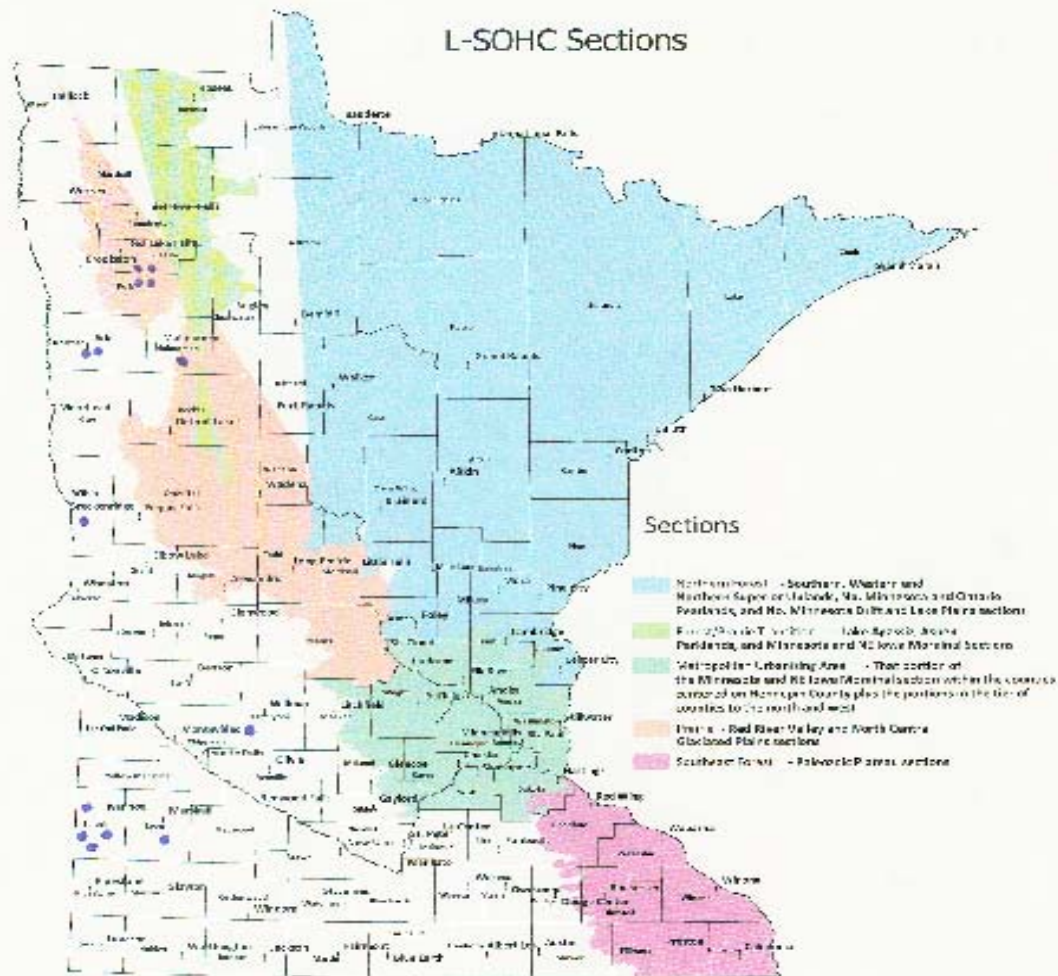
K. Attach a list of your projects listing their county location and edit the map of Minnesota on the next page to show each project as a symbol.

Pending Land Acquisition Properties for the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR Land Acquisition Project:

1. 790 acre fee title tract in Wilkin County
2. 360 acre fee title tract in Red Lake County
3. 320 acre fee title tract in Red Lake County
4. 110 acre fee title tract in Polk County
5. 400 acre fee title tract in Polk County
6. 145 acre easement tract in Norman County
7. 160 acre easement tract in Norman County
8. 160 acre easement tract in Mahnomen County
9. 118 acre easement tract in Lincoln County
10. 97 acre easement tract in Lyon County
11. 70 acre easement tract in Lincoln County
12. 70 acres easement tract in Lincoln County
13. 40 acre easement tract in Lincoln County
14. 240 acre easement tract in Kandiyohi County

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