

Program Title: Sandy Lake Habitat Project

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

Program or Project Title: # 42 Sandy Lake Habitat Project

Date: November 2, 2009

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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	2,000,000	0	0	0

A. Summary

The purpose of this request is to open nearly 1000 acres of one of the best waterfowl hunting, bird-watching and hiking areas in Aitkin County to the public under a conservation easement. A permanent conservation easement will stop the flow of fertilizer run-off into the Sandy River caused by the farming of wild rice. In addition, the largest property tax base in Aitkin County, Big Sandy Lake, will be protected from further water quality degradation, thereby further enhancing property values. Within a short period of time, Big Sandy Lake will show measureable water restoration and significant improvement of its existing water quality bringing it back toward the pristine condition it once was. Big Sandy lake is identified as

an impaired water by the MN Pollution Control Agency through an on-going Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) study. Preliminary indications are that a significant source of excess nutrients is the Sandy River downstream of the rice paddies referenced in this application.

PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS REPRESENTS A ONE TIME CONSERVATION EASEMENT OPPORTUNITY THAT WOULD BE LOST IF NOT TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF IMMEDIATELY.

B. Background Information

1. What is the problem or opportunity being addressed?

Over the last several years, Big Sandy Lake has progressively become greener and greener due to the increase in algae. Aerial views of Big Sandy indicate an increasing level of unwanted plant growth throughout the lake which, at some point in the future, could dramatically impact the fish population and enjoyment of the lake. A major reason for this greening is the dumping of fertilizer from 300 - 800 acres of rice paddies into Sandy River which flows into Big Sandy Lake.

2. What action will be taken?

About 1000 acres of one of the best waterfowl hunting, bird-watching and hiking areas in Aitkin County will be opened to the public under a conservation easement. This permanent conservation easement will prevent any future flow of fertilized run-off water into Sandy River. Commercial farm application of fertilizers, and pesticides will be prohibited on this site. Drainage of the site will be stopped so that the wetlands can filter nutrients and provide outstanding wildlife habitat.

3. Who will take action and when?

Aitkin County SWCD is presenting this application to LSOHC for funding. Organizations from the State of Minnesota and Aitkin County will purchase the easement and control the permanent easement area.

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

A Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) for Forest Habitat application is being submitted on behalf of 15 northern Minnesota counties. In that application, the BWSR will hold the easements in the RIM program and will require yearly compliance checks. This project will be accepted as well.

- 5. What specific habitat changes will occur if this item is funded? Be specific about and list multiple benefits if they exist.**
- a. Restores nearly 1000 acres of wetlands to original state of sustaining game and wildlife**
 - b. Restores Big Sandy Lake to original state by improving and protecting water quality**
 - c. Enhances lakeshore property values on Big Sandy and adjacent lakes**
 - d. Enhances adjacent property values and increases business opportunity**
 - e. Opens pristine duck and goose hunting conservation easement to public hunting**
 - f. Protects and advances the public interest for generations to come**
 - g. Preserves existing ecological systems and prevents future degradation of those systems**

By purchasing the conservation easement in the existing rice paddies, this pristine duck and goose hunting property will be opened to public hunting, thereby dramatically increasing access to nearly 1000 acres of one of the best duck and goose hunting areas in Aitkin County. By significantly reducing the outflow of fertilizer and pesticides into Big Sandy Lake, the quality of fishing in Big Sandy will markedly improve. Swimming, water skiing, boating, and other water related activities will become more enjoyable. Together, these actions will significantly increase the desire of tourists to visit Aitkin County for their hunting, fishing, boating and recreational enjoyment, thereby raising the economic base in Aitkin County.

- 6. When do you expect to see these habitat changes?**
- a. The wildlife habitat improvements will occur immediately.**
 - b. The improvement in the quality of water in Big Sandy Lake will occur over a period of time. Definite measureable progress should be seen within 5 years.**
- 7. Will your Outdoor Heritage Fund dollar request complete the planned accomplishments?**
- X YES NO**
- If not, how will you finance completion?**
- 8. How will you pay for the maintenance of the accomplishments?**

There should be only minimal maintenance required to maintain trails for access. This could be accomplished with existing county and State personnel. Annual RIM funds provide for easement monitoring and any necessary enforcement of the easement terms.

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

- a. As indicated above, some of the best private wetlands in Aitkin County used for duck and goose hunting, and bird-watching will be opened to public enjoyment. These wetlands will be restored and enhanced by maintaining water levels for wildlife habitat benefits throughout the year rather than draining them in the summer in preparation for wild rice harvesting in the fall.**
- b. Once the millions of gallons of water, containing truckloads of commercial fertilizer from the rice paddies, is no longer discharged into Sandy River, the quality of water in Big Sandy Lake will improve. Big Sandy has approximately 77 miles of shoreline and 6,500 acres of water for fish and wildlife, boating, swimming, fishing, and other recreational activities. Currently, some areas of the lake are too green to swim in from late June through September. Terminating the fertilizer discharge will directly and significantly enhance the water quality of Big Sandy Lake.**

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

x YES

NO

If yes briefly describe the kind of protection.

A permanent environmental easement will be purchased to ensure the restoration continues in perpetuity.

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

The purchase of the environmental easement will be public knowledge and controlled by local and state agencies.

12. Why will this strategy work?

It will open one of the most desirable private duck and goose hunting and bird-watching areas to the public.

It eliminates the massive amount of fertilizer released into Sandy River each year by the wild rice paddies and will dramatically reduce the amount of unwanted nutrients flowing into Big Sandy Lake.

- 13. Who might make decisions that assist or work against achieving the expected impact program?**

No one that I know of would be opposed to this purchase.

Most of the hundreds of Minnesota residents who live and have cabins around and on Big Sandy Lake are concerned about the dramatic increase in algae in the lake. It currently impacts everything they do on the lake.

- 14. If this is acquisition of land, has the local government formally approved the acquisition? N/A**

_____ YES

_____ NO

- 15. If this is fee simple acquisition of land, is the land free of any other permanent protection such as a conservation easement? N/A**

_____ YES

_____ NO

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

____X____ YES

_____ NO

If Yes what kind of use?

It ensures this conservation easement will remain open to the public for hiking, bird-watching and the taking of waterfowl and game as provided by law.

- 17. 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?**

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☒ **YES**

☐ **NO**

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

This will be a permanent conservation easement.

_____ **Years**

19. 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

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

☒ **YES**

☐ **NO**

If yes, please explain.

Continued dumping of fertilizer into Sandy River will continue to dramatically degrade the quality of Big Sandy Lake for fishing, boating and other types of recreation on the water.

Soon new owners of the property will make decisions on how the rice paddies are to be used in the future. The conservation easement must be purchased from these new owners immediately or the opportunity to purchase it may be lost forever. This would dramatically impact the quality of Big Sandy Lake.

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

☒ **YES**

☐ **NO**

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If Yes, list the names of the AMAs, WMAs and/or SNAs and the acres to be restored and/or enhanced.

Hunting in the Grayling Wildlife Management Area along with hunting in thousands of acres of adjacent State property will be enhanced by the conservation easement in the wild rice paddies. The Grayling Marsh WMA is managed by the DNR for multiple wildlife and public benefits. This proposed area will provide a perfect complement to the Grayling WMA.

22. 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?

 YES X NO
If yes explain the model briefly.

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

Studies, including the on-going TMDL effort, show that excessive levels of algae in lake waters are detrimental to optimum fish production and lake enjoyment. The continued massive drainage of fertilizer from the wild rice paddies into Sandy River which flows into Big Sandy Lake is now turning Big Sandy “green” throughout a good portion of the summer. Continued dumping of this fertilizer into Big Sandy could destroy the existing fish population. It will also dramatically reduce the use of the lake for swimming, water skiing, fishing, and other outdoor water sports. Once this occurs, there will be a significant economic impact to Aitkin County and the State of Minnesota as people will no longer consider Big Sandy Lake a desirable place for outdoor enjoyment. Demand for housing will decrease as people look elsewhere for summer cabins and millions of dollars normally spent in Aitkin County on recreation will be spent elsewhere.

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

- A. Allow the funding for the conservation easement to be released immediately (this will ensure the remaining items occur)**
- B. Then stop draining millions of gallons of water with fertilizer from the wild rice paddies**
- C. Over a period of time, this will bring Big Sandy Lake back to the pristine condition it once was**

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D. Open the conservation easement to public hunting, hiking, and bird=watching.

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

D. Budget

Budget Item	Fiscal Year 11	Fiscal Year 12	Fiscal Year 13
Personnel			
Contracts			
Equipment/Tools/Supplies			
Fee Acquisition	2,000,000 (1000 acres @ \$2,000/acre)		
Easement Acquisition			
Easement Stewardship			
Professional Services			
Travel			
Additional Budget Items			
TOTAL			

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.
<i>No new personnel are anticipated</i>		

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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 Leverage	Fiscal Year 11	Fiscal Year 12	Fiscal Year 13
	RIM maintenance funds through BWSR	RIM maintenance funds through BWSR	RIM maintenance funds through BWSR
TOTAL			

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*

Table 1 Accomplish-ments	Wetlands	Prairies	Forests	Habitats for Fish, Game and Wildlife
Restore	Up to 1000 ac			Restore water quality in Big Sandy Lake & adjacent lakes
Protect	Up to 1000 ac		Grayling WMA	Water quality, fishing, boating, swimming in 6500 acre Big Sandy lake & adjacent lakes
Enhance	Up to 1000 ac		Grayling WMA	Water quality, fishing boating, swimming, in 6500 ac Big Sandy Lake & adjacent lakes

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Table 2 Sections Impacted and Impact Quantifier	Wetlands	Prairies	Forests	Habitats for Fish, Game and Wildlife
Restore	<i>Up to 1000 ac</i>			<i>Water quality and fishing in Big Sandy Lake</i>
Protect	<i>Up to 1000 ac</i>		<i>Grayling WMA</i>	<i>Water quality, swimming and fishing in 6500ac Big Sandy lake and adjacent lakes</i>
Enhance	<i>Up to 1000 ac</i>		<i>Grayling WMA</i>	<i>Water quality, swimming, boating, fishing in 6500ac Big Sandy Lake & adjacent lakes</i>

Table 3 Recommend Fund Allocation	Wetlands	Prairies	Forests	Habitats for Fish, Game and Wildlife
Restore	<i>1000ac X 2k/ac=\$2,000,000</i>			<i>Water quality, fishing, & swimming in 6500 ac Big Sandy lake & adjacent lakes</i>
Protect				<i>Water quality, fishing, & swimming in 6500 ac Big Sandy Lake & adjacent lakes</i>
Enhance				<i>Water quality, fishing, boating, & swimming in 6500 ac Big Sandy Lake & adjacent lakes</i>

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Table 4 Leverage \$ N/A	Wetlands	Prairies	Forests	Habitats for Fish, Game and Wildlife
Restore				
Protect				
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				
Permanent Easement	<i>1000 acres rice paddies</i>			<i>Hunting, Water quality, swimming, boating, fishing in 6500ac Big Sandy Lake & adjacent lakes</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
Purchase necessary portions of wild rice paddies adjacent to the Sandy River to block off flowage of fertilizer into Sandy River and to protect waterfowl and fish habitat.	ASAP	stop water flow from rice paddies to Sandy River

I. Relationship to Your Current Budget

**All included. (Final cost dependent upon the amount of acreage required,
@ \$2,000/acre, approximately 1000 acres anticipated)**

J. How Will the Habitat Improvements Be Sustained?

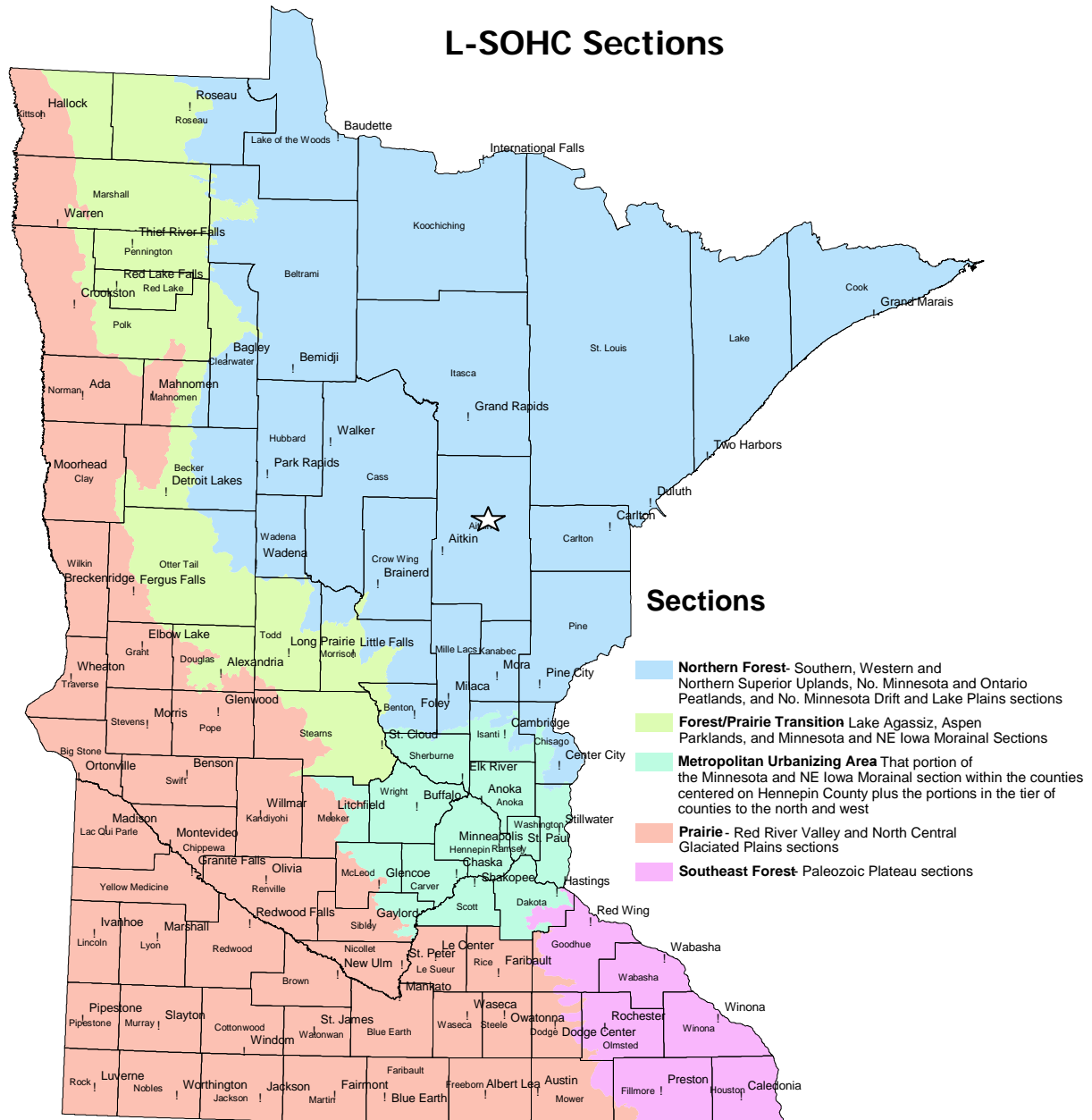
**Should be minimal cost to maintain waterfowl hunting areas in conservation
easement by Aitkin County and State of MN personnel**

**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.**

Double left click to bring up the map editor. Symbols should be on the left side of the pop-up banner at the top of your screen or at the bottom left depending on your software.

If you can't bring up the interactive map editor follow these instructions:

1. Make a paper copy of the map,
2. By hand place symbols on the map corresponding to the location of the projects in your proposal,
3. Scan the marked map to a pdf, and
4. Insert the marked pdf map as the last page in your submission.





Some of the waterfowl observed on November 2, 2009 on the easement site.