

## L-SOHC Questionnaire

Program Request Title: 5 The RIM-WRP Partnership

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### **A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:**

#### **1. Why there is an urgent need to act NOW?**

The RIM-WRP Partnership enables Minnesota to leverage \$1.4 of federal Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) funding for every state dollar available through RIM Reserve. The RIM-WRP Partnership request for funding of \$18 million from the Outdoor Heritage fund (OHF) will leverage \$25 million of WRP funds. Minnesota NRCS, is again expecting to receive at least \$25 Million of WRP funds in 2010 which would require at least \$18 million in state funds to leverage this level of funding.

The 2008 Federal Farm Bill has increased the maximum enrollment in the WRP to 3.04 million acres nationwide. As of the end of fiscal year 2009, NRCS has enrolled approximately 2.175 million acres in the program. In order to enroll the maximum allowed WRP acres by the Farm Bill, NRCS will need to enroll approximately 900,000 acres by September 30, 2012. In order to accomplish this task, NRCS will need to increase their current ability to enroll easements by 200 to 300 percent, annually.

Minnesota's successful RIM-WRP Partnership makes us uniquely qualified to receive unprecedented amounts of WRP funds if state funds can be generated to leverage federal funds via the RIM Reserve Program.

WRP funds must be allocated by early summer of 2010 and obligated by August 1, 2010. If this does not occur, Minnesota's WRP allocation will be sent to another state.

### **B. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR PROGRAM ACTIVITIES**

#### **1. Tell the Council how much of your proposal is acquisition and how much restoration/enhancement?**

Eighty percent of the total budget will be used to acquire 120 permanent conservation easements on 12,000 acres. Twenty percent of the total budget will be used to restore 600 previously drained wetland basins totaling 4,000 acres, and the restoration of native grassland prairies totaling approximately 8,000 acres.

#### **2. How will the public be able to use the projects in this program and enjoy the benefits of this public investment?**

The RIM-WRP Partnership is a private lands conservation easement program that provides significant conservation benefits to the public. Typically, these conservation easements remain in private ownership. This does not preclude public access and recreational use; however, hunting, fishing, bird watching, etc. will be dependent upon landowners allowing access with their permission.

The goal of the RIM-WRP Partnership is to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values while optimizing wildlife habitat on every acre enrolled in the partnership. It is important to note that the wetland and prairie restoration on these sites will permanently improve these critical habitats in the general area and increase fish and wildlife populations, which will improve fishing and hunting opportunities overall. In addition, habitat for native vegetation and migratory wildlife, particularly birds such as ducks, shore birds, etc. will be greatly enhanced providing greater appreciation for those interested in observing plants and wildlife in a natural environment.

## **C. PRIORITIES**

### **1. Specifically, how does your program address the Council's statewide and/or regional priorities?**

The RIM-WRP Partnership acquires permanent conservation easements on lands with previously drained wetlands and associated upland native grassland complexes. Restoration of previously drained wetlands and native grassland prairie complexes will be accomplished on all conservation easement using designs and specifications that provide the greatest wetland function and values and optimizes wildlife habitat on every acre enrolled. For every \$1 of state funding, it leverages \$1.4 federal WRP funds in Minnesota, a positive attribute.

Although the RIM-WRP Partnership is a statewide program, it gives priority to that portion of Minnesota that has had the greatest loss of wetlands and prairies and subsequently significant declines in many species of wildlife that are wetland complex dependent. These efforts are to primarily occur in the L-SOHC Forest/Prairie Transition and the Prairie Sections.

Specifically the RIM-WRP Partnership will protect and restore wetland and native grassland complexes by converting agricultural lands to wetland upland complexes in the Forest/Prairie Transition, Prairie and Metro Urbanizing L-SOHC Sections.

### **2. Tell the Council how do you set priorities among the opportunities available to this program? Be SPECIFIC**

The RIM-WRP Partnership uses the NRCS State Technical Committee's established subcommittee for WRP to provide statewide guidance for WRP in Minnesota. In addition, the RIM Reserve Management Planning Committee-a subcommittee of the Board of Water and Soil Resources-provides oversight and guidance on behalf of the State.

The RIM-WRP Partnership holds one to two joint meetings per year to provide program oversight and guidance and to establish payment rates for upcoming sign-ups to be held. Specifically, the RIM-WRP Partnership has had the USFWS Habitat and Population Evaluation Team (HAPET), located in Fergus Falls, develop a Wildlife Habitat Potential Model for use with the WRP and RIM Reserve Programs environmental evaluation.

In addition, the RIM-WRP Partnership has developed the Minnesota Wetlands Restoration Evaluation Worksheet which is used to evaluate each easement application on its potential to restore wetland functions and values and optimizes wildlife habitat on the selected and enrolled acres.

### **3. Tell the Council how you define "science-based strategic planning"**

Continuing the answer in question 2 above, the RIM-WRP partnership utilizes the Wildlife Habitat Potential Model and the Minnesota Wetlands Restoration Evaluation Worksheet to score and rank all applications. Funding occurs in ranked order since these tools have been developed using the best science based technical knowledge and experts, information and strategic planning. Selected applications will yield the highest value to the wildlife species identified and to the complexes and ecosystem as a whole.

The restoration of each site is governed by a conservation plan that follows the 9 step planning process that is used by NRCS and SWCD personnel at the local level. The plan that is developed includes input from the landowner and various partners. In addition, all practices that are proposed are found in the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide and have been developed and proven as science based to withstand the test of time and to treat the resource concerns that have been identified.

## D. PROGRAM DETAILS:

### 1. The Work

- a. Enumerate the specific kinds of action you plan to take to protect, enhance, and/or restore natural systems.

**Conduct sign-up, ranking and selection for funding application rec'd** Winter 2010 240

- Landowner notification

**Easement Acquisition Stage 2010-2013 120 easements acquired**

- RIM-WRP Agreements for Purchase-landowner signature
- Field investigation/topographic survey/concept plan
- Legal boundary surveys
- Preliminary design and engineering report
- Title work
- Conservation plan development
- Easement closing and recording of 30-year WRP and perpetual RIM Reserve easements

**Wetland restoration and conservation plan implementation 2010-2013 12,000 acres restored**

- Final plans and construction
- Restore wetlands (4,000 acres)
- Restore native grassland (8,000 acres)

- b. **What species will be helped?**

By restoring wetlands and associated native grassland uplands, the RIM-WRP Partnership provides habitat for a large array of plants and animals that depend upon wetlands, and grasslands. One third of all bird species in Minnesota depend on wetland grassland complexes during some part of the year. RIM-WRP Partnership provides critical nesting habitat for shore birds and waterfowl. In addition these wetland grassland complexes provide critical migration habitat for dozens of bird species for their annual migrations. Many of which are federally listed, threatened and endangered species.

These wetland native grassland complexes also provide resident wildlife species with critical habitat such as prairie chickens, pheasant, deer and furbearers.

- c. **Do you currently have the capacity to get the work done that you are requesting dollars for in FY 2011? -- Explain**

The local delivery system of NRCS, BWSR and SWCD personnel along with partner employees and contractors (Ducks Unlimited, MN Waterfowl Association, Pheasants Forever) is in place to assist with this effort. In addition, staff from NRCS and BWSR at the State and Area levels will provide support to manage the program, close easements and plan and design practices.

Additional staff will be secured through L-SOHC funding and NRCS additional funding to secure contract and term employees.

### 2. Program Work Location

- a. **What percent of your work will be prairie?** 67%
- b. **What percent of your work will be wetland?** 33%

- c. **What percent of your work will be forest? NA**
- d. **What percent of your work will be aquatic systems? NA**
- e. **Is it part of a larger habitat complex? If yes BRIEFLY describe the complex.**

Yes- In items C 2 and 3 above the scoring and evaluation process was discussed. In general, all funded applications are a complex of wetlands and associated uplands. Few, if any sites are a small singular wetland basin. Complexes will score more points and have a better chance of being funded.

At the local level priority is given to seeking applications in areas that link existing protected lands and build upon existing habitat. In this way a larger wildlife benefit occurs versus a stand-alone parcel. In addition, priority has been given to restoring shallow lake basins, as identified by DNR, Ducks Unlimited and other partners.

### **3. How We Plan to Use the Funds Requested**

- a. **What percent reduction could you accept without rendering your project inoperable?**

The RIM-WRP Partnership leverages \$1.4 federal WRP funds for every \$1 state. For every \$1 reduction in RIM Reserve funds, we would lose \$2.4 (RIM and WRP) for protection and restoration in Minnesota's wetlands and prairies. We could accept a reduction in our request, and would like to have further discussions with L-SOHC to evaluate the impacts a reduction would have on the RIM-WRP Partnership accomplishments.

- b. **Have you also applied to the Outdoor Heritage Fund Conservation Partners Grant Program operated by DNR? No**

- c. **Where else might you get money for this project?**

The BWSR submitted a \$50 million capital investment (Bonding) request for FY 2010-2011. We will not know whether Governor Pawlenty's request for agency bonding will include a RIM Reserve request until sometime in January of 2010. We believe at a minimum for the next two federal fiscal years NRCS will receive \$50 million/year which will require a \$36 million in state funds to leverage these federal funds.

So, if we assume that we receive a \$50 million capital investment appropriation (unlikely), we will need at least a \$22 million OHF over the next two fiscal years.

### **4. Personnel Details**

- a. **Describe the personnel duties. Are they office staff or field staff – existing or new positions?**

Continuing the answer in D., 1.c., the RIM-WRP request identifies the need of 3 new BWSR FTE's. These positions are: .5 FTE engineer, 1.5 FTE Engineer Technician, .5 FTE Plant Ecologist, and .5 FTE Easement Acquisition Specialist. These positions would work solely on the RIM-WRP Partnership projects to ensure the timely delivery of the conservation outcomes. The Easement Acquisition Specialist would be a central office position, while the others would be located regionally in field offices with major field level responsibilities. In addition, these positions would all support the activities of the local NRCS, SWCD, and partner employees and contractors in the delivery and development of the conservation projects with the private landowners.