

L-SOHC Questionnaire

10 - Accelerating the Waterfowl Production Area Program in Minnesota: Protecting Our Investment

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A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:

1. **Why there is an urgent need to act NOW?** Currently the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), has a backlog of private landowners interested in selling their land to the federal government for conservation purposes. In addition, Pheasants Forever (PF), and FWS cooperatively identify priority parcels that add significant habitat value to existing habitat complexes. FWS field staff evaluate every piece of property offered for sale based on criteria established for the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program. Some of the criteria include: 1) proximity to other wetland/grassland areas, 2) wetland and grassland restoration potential, 3) priority area for waterfowl and grassland nesting birds, and, 4) ability to create large wetland/grassland complexes. Land prices are coming down and the time to buy is now.

B. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

1. **Tell the Council how much of your proposal is acquisition and how much restoration/enhancement?** Of our \$6,865,000 request to the Council, \$5,600,000 will be used for land acquisition and \$1,200,000 will be used for wetland and grassland restoration. The remaining \$65,000 will be used for personnel costs allowing this partnership to achieve identified results.
2. **How will the public be able to use all the projects in this program and enjoy the benefits of this public investment?** By law, fee lands acquired as Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA), are open for hunting, fishing, bird watching, photography, interpretation, and environmental education.

C. PRIORITIES

1. **Specifically, how does your program address the Council's statewide and/or regional priorities?** This proposal focuses on the acquisition and restoration of 1,400 acres of converted wetland and grassland habitat in the prairie regions of Minnesota. These activities have and continue to be, a priority for the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council. Wetland and grassland habitats restored, and permanently protected, through this grant will benefit species such as mallards, upland sandpipers, short-eared owls, pheasants, western prairie fringed orchid, bobolinks, prairie chicken, and American bitterns. Many of these species are listed in various National, Regional, or State-level plans including the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Partners in Flight Physiographic Area Plan for the Tallgrass Prairie, State Pheasant Plan, and the Minnesota Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan.

2. **Tell the Council how do you set priorities among the opportunities available to this program? Be SPECIFIC** The FWS is the primary federal agency responsible for the conservation of migratory birds, federally threatened or endangered species, and some inter-jurisdictional fish. Using landscape level planning tools produced by our Habitat and Population Evaluation Team staff in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, FWS field staff review properties offered for sale and compare these lands to evaluation criteria established for the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program. Some of those criteria were referenced in A1 above. If the restoration potential of the land in question meets our evaluation criteria, the land is recommended for purchase from FWS field staff to our Regional Office at Ft. Snelling. Many properties are not recommended for purchase based on their geographic location, restoration potential, and/or proximity to other conservation lands. Properties recommended for acquisition by Wetland Management District or National Wildlife Refuge staff in Minnesota are further evaluated by Regional Office staff using HAPET products to determine statewide priority and based on our available acquisition budget. This second round of evaluation at the Regional Office further reduces the number of properties that are recommended for acquisition into the WPA program.

3. **Tell the Council how you define “science-based strategic planning”** The FWS has developed what we refer to as “Strategic Habitat Conservation” (SHC), as our science-based strategic planning tool. SHC involves: 1) biological planning to establish population goals and habitat objectives, 2) conservation delivery where FWS/partners conserve and restore specific habitats for specific species, and, 3) evaluation of implementation strategies to determine if these strategies are achieving intended results. FWS HAPET staff in Fergus Falls, Minnesota has as its primary function to do biological planning for the tallgrass prairie regions of Minnesota and north-central Iowa.

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.** Acquisition priorities have been established for the WPA program and annually PF and the FWS will cooperatively establish priorities for that year. PF staff will then take the list of acquisition priorities and follow-up with each willing seller to make sure they are interested in receiving an offer. If the private landowner remains interested, PF will contract out for an appraisal, appraisal review and follow appropriate acquisition procedures to make an offer to the private landowner. If the offer is accepted by the private landowner, PF will arrange a time/date for closing. At the closing, the landowner will be paid and the land will be transferred to the FWS as a new WPA, and part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Appropriate notice of grant restrictions will be recorded at the time of closing. Once in federal ownership, PF, FWS, and other partners will begin the restoration of converted wetlands and grasslands on the subject property. Wetlands will be restored by either tile breaks, ditch plugs, and/or the placement of water control structures on the outlets of converted basins. Grasslands will be restored using local ecotype prairie seed by either mechanically planting or hand spreading on suitable substrates. Some follow-up interseeding and/or weed control may be required. Most, if not all restoration work, will be completed approximately 2-years following fee acquisition.

- b. **What species will be helped?** Grassland species that will benefit from this project include, but are not limited to: upland sandpiper, short-eared owl, pheasant, western prairie fringed orchid, bobolink, prairie chicken, and the grasshopper sparrow.
Wetland species that will benefit from this project include, but are not limited to: mallards, blue-winged teal, American bittern, black terns, trumpeter swans, common egret, and sora rails.
- c. **Do you currently have the capacity to get the work done that you are requesting dollars for in FY 2011? -- Explain** Yes. Partnering with PF provides the FWS greater acquisition capacity for the WPA program. Much of the acquisition work will be contracted out by PF and will not require FWS oversight. Once acquired, lands will become WPA's and managed by existing FWS staff on Wetland Management Districts or National Wildlife Refuges.

2. Program Work Location

- a. **What percent of your work will be prairie?** *1,000 acres of grassland will be permanently protected and restored.*
- b. **What percent of your work will be wetland?** 400 acres of wetland will be restored and permanently protected.
- c. **What percent of your work will be forest?** N/A
- d. **What percent of your work will be aquatic systems?** N/A
- e. **Is it part of a larger habitat complex? If yes BRIEFLY describe the complex.**
Within the Small Wetland Acquisition Program one of the priority criteria to consider is the establishment of wetland/grassland complexes. This priority favors those projects that build upon our existing investment of private/public land stewardship at the site and landscape levels.

3. How We Plan to Use the Funds Requested

- a. **What percent reduction could you accept without rendering your project inoperable?** PF and the FWS will work with whatever dollar amount the Council deems appropriate to deliver permanent wetland and grassland conservation.
- b. **Have you also applied to the Outdoor Heritage Fund Conservation Partners Grant Program operated by DNR?** The FWS has not applied for Conservation Partners Grant Program dollars. However, PF has applied for a CPL grant and that work is completely distinct from the work proposed here. Other non-government organizations may also have applied to the CPL to acquire other lands which would become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- c. **Where else might you get money for this project?** Currently the FWS uses our annual allocation of "Duck Stamp" dollars for Minnesota to acquire *new* WPA's. There remains a backlog of interested landowners and without the Lessard-Sams OHC dollars, this need will go un-met.

4. Personnel Details

- a. **Describe the personnel duties. Are they office staff or field staff – existing or new positions?** *Documented, direct to project personnel costs are requested by PF as part of this grant proposal.* Existing staff will perform a majority of the functions described in this grant proposal.