

L-SOHC Questionnaire

Program Request Title: 14 **Northeastern MN Sharp-tailed Grouse Habitat Partnership**

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A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:

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

If key open and brushland tracts are not acquired while opportunities exist (i.e. willing sellers), the chance to protect them from habitat fragmentation, development and parcelization may be lost. Sharp-tailed grouse are a unique, native grouse that require large, open landscapes and serve as a flagship species for brushland wildlife. Research suggests that suitable habitat patches of at least 10,000 acres are needed to sustain subpopulations. It is more cost effective now to protect, restore and enhance their required habitats, while opportunities exist and land markets are depressed or stabilized, and speculative development pressure have temporarily eased, than it will be in the future. The importance of protecting these habitats NOW to maintain adequate open and brushland habitat within priority complexes, to complement past brushland habitat investments, to keep sharp-tailed grouse subpopulations connected, to benefit other wildlife that also need these habitat, and to prevent a decrease of genetic diversity in sharp-tailed grouse in northeastern Minnesota, cannot be stressed enough. Recent preliminary research results have shown that genetic diversity may be declining due to increasing isolation of subpopulations. (In nearby Wisconsin, genetic diversity has declined so greatly that their DNR will be translocating sharp-tailed grouse to create a genetic infusion to increase the likelihood that populations will persist.)

B. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

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

Of the funds requested, 95% are proposed for acquisition of open, brushland (2,267.4 acres) and forest habitats (165 acres). The remaining 5% is for restoration and enhancement of these habitats.

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

Minnesotans will see multiple benefits from projects of this partnership, including: more public lands for hunting, hiking, bird watching, nature photography, economic boosts for local communities, etc.; enhanced open and brushland habitat and wildlife populations for consumptive, non-consumptive, and aesthetic benefits; and an investment in these resources and benefits for future generations.

C. PRIORITIES

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

This partnership's projects will directly address statewide and regional priorities. Statewide priorities of ongoing programs, multiple conservation benefits, leverage, public access, conservation opportunities, use of science-based strategic planning and evaluation, consideration of species of greatest conservation need (SGCN), and greater access to the outdoors will be directly addressed by: applying an ongoing, adaptive management approach that identifies key open and brushland habitat tracts available for protection, restoration and enhancement within priority brushland complexes where multiple SGCN will benefit and multiple conservation benefits will be achieved; continuing to collaborate and seek partnerships and additional support; utilizing existing programs and networks of conservation lands such as the WMA system; evaluating project results; and adjusting plans and management as needed.

Regional priorities will also be directly addressed. As noted in the Northern Forest Section Vision, the condition of brushlands within the forest lands is of special concern. These lands are crucial for game and nongame species. The partnership's projects will address this regional concern, as well as priority actions of protecting and improving habitat on streams and rivers, protecting forest land, and restoring and enhancing habitat for rare, endangered or threatened species by: acquiring, restoring and enhancing habitat on tracts within priority brushland complexes that have riparian zones, forest land, and rare, endangered or threatened species.

Management objectives of these projects will parallel objectives outlined in the *Minnesota Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan* (protect priority lands; improve connectivity and access to outdoor recreation; restore land, wetlands and wetland-associated watershed; keep water on the landscape), *MDNR's Tomorrow's Habitat of the Wild and Rare* (conserve SGCN and key habitats, stabilize and increase populations of SGCN), *MDNR's Strategic Conservation Agenda* (address energy and climate, and landscape change trends through potential biomass harvest as a brushland habitat management tool and addition of WMAs, respectively) and *Minnesota's WMA Acquisition – The Next 50 Years – Habitat is the Key* (meet goal of additional WMA acres).

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

For consideration of protection, enhancement and restoration efforts by the partnership, open and brushland tracts must be located within an ECS landtype association identified as a priority open landscape through DNR's SFRMP landscape planning process. Further criteria to prioritize which tracts are most critical include a ranking system based upon points received for county location, distance to active sharp-tailed grouse lek, tract size, and distance to protected brushland.

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

Our partnership defines and uses science-based strategic planning as: First, biological planning (using the best available science to determine limiting factors to wildlife populations, identifying goals); second, conservation design (developing habitat objectives and strategies); third, delivery (implementation of conservation actions on the ground); fourth, monitoring and research (monitoring and evaluation to determine if goals and objectives are being met); and finally, adjustments in strategies as needed to maintain an adaptive approach.

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.**

The partnership will seek funding, provide matching funds, and cooperate with willing landowners in Aitkin, St. Louis and Kanabec Counties to appraise, acquire and donate seven priority open and brushland tracts to DNR for designation as WMAs. Initial management action to prepare the WMAs for public use and to enhance and restore habitats on them will include boundary surveys and posting, access and parking areas, fence and building removal, prescribed burning, shearing or mowing, and seeding.

Specific habitat changes from these actions will include the protection and addition of up to 2,267.4 acres of open and brushland habitat and 165 acres of forest habitat. Natural habitats on the tracts include sedge meadow, shrub wetland, grassland, marsh, river and aspen forest. They will be managed with prescribed burning, mowing, shearing, timber harvest, and possibly grazing, biomass harvest and occasional haying to maintain the open and brushland landscape. Other habitats include excavated ponds, and crop, hay and pasture land that will be encouraged to revert back to natural open and brushland habitat either by seeding and/or allowing natural succession to occur.

Multiple benefits of these actions will include increased plant and animal diversity, carbon sequestration, water retention and filtration, opportunities for biomass harvest, access to public lands for recreation and secure habitat for sharp-tailed grouse and other open and brushland SGCN.

- b. What species will be helped?**

Open and brushland species that are in decline, listed as SGCN, and will benefit from these projects include sharp-tailed grouse, bobolinks, loggerhead shrikes, short-eared owls, yellow rails, eastern meadowlarks, American bittern, northern harrier, golden-winged warblers, Henslow's sparrow, Le Conte's sparrow, Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrow, Wilson's phalarope, sedge wren, eastern meadowlark, brown thrasher, and American woodcock. Six of these species are state listed as endangered, threatened or special concern.

Game species that will benefit include white-tailed deer, waterfowl (mallards, blue-winged teal, Canada geese, wood ducks, and more species during migration), wild turkey, American woodcock, common snipe, ruffed grouse, cottontail rabbit, snowshoe hare, fox, raccoon, and bobcat. Many nongame species such as the Eastern bluebird, American kestrel, gray catbird, common yellowthroat, sora rail, and spring peeper will benefit, as well as the sandhill crane which is expanding its range.

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

Yes, the partnership has the capacity to carry out this proposal if funds are received. Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (MSGs) will coordinate and manage the partnership. Pheasants Forever (PF) will serve as the fiscal agent, manage the grant and assist with appraisals. Local DNR wildlife managers will cooperate with willing sellers, oversee and conduct on the ground habitat work, and hire contractors.

2. Program Work Location

a. What percent of your work will be prairie? 0%

b. What percent of your work will be wetland? 31.5%

(Wetland acres are predominantly open and brushland habitats.)

c. What percent of your work will be forest? 68.5%

(Forest acres are upland. Because brushlands in the Northern Forest are not part of prairie ecosystems, they are placed under the Forest category along with the open land habitats intermixed with them.)

d. What percent of your work will be aquatic systems? 0%

e. Is it part of a larger habitat complex? If yes BRIEFLY describe the complex.

Yes, the seven tracts are all located with larger brushland complexes that include undisturbed brushland (sedge meadow, lowland shrub, open bog, CRP, old fields), hayfields, pasture, crop land and forest.

3. How We Plan to Use the Funds Requested

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

A 16% reduction could be accepted. The top two priority tracts (Tumler, 1285 acres and Thompson, 279.7 acres) require 84% of the requested funding to sufficiently protect, restore, and enhance them. Opportunities to protect such large tracts as these are rare. Without funding through this grant, protection of these tracts would be very difficult. They are crucial to sustaining the local sharp-tailed grouse populations associated with them.

b. Have you also applied to the Outdoor Heritage Fund Conservation Partners Grant Program operated by DNR?

Yes. MSGS has applied for \$48,000 to conduct enhancement of brushland habitat. PF has applied for \$403,487 to acquire three parcels as additions to our Waterfowl Production Area complexes and to complete various grassland restoration and enhancement projects across Minnesota's farmland region.

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

Funds are also being sought from existing partners and new partners will be sought as opportunities arise. \$48,600 is currently leveraged from partners as pledges and in-kind services. Additional funds are expected from partners as their chapters hold meetings and discuss the projects.

4. Personnel Details

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

Personnel will include existing staff from PF (office staff) and DNR Wildlife (field staff) to manage the grant, assist with appraisals, cooperate with willing sellers, oversee and conduct on the ground work, and hire contractors for boundary survey, parking lot development, shearing, and seeding.