

L-SOHC Questionnaire

Program Request Title: 17 Minnesota Prairie Recovery Project

Program Manager: Tom Landwehr

Telephone Number: 612-331-0705

A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:

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

Three reasons:

- a. With the new OHF funding, we need to greatly increase the effectiveness of our prairie conservation work. Traditional tools (e.g., WMA acquisition) will continue to be important, but pressures to reduce ongoing costs and maximize collaboration requires the conservation community to develop new and efficient tools for conservation.
- b. Prairies are our most threatened native habitat type. Improvements in technologies (e.g., drought resistant crops), federal subsidies for commodity crops, and increased demands due to ethanol production means prairies are lost every day.
- c. Public grasslands – especially WMAs – don't receive the level of management required to optimize wildlife values. This proposal will begin to address the backlog of needs for management, and slow the degradation of these prairies.

B. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

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

This proposal requests \$4 million for acquisition, and \$2.3 million for restoration/enhancement.

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

In several ways, including:

- a. All lands acquired will be open to public hunting, fishing and similar non-motorized activities.
- b. Enhancement activities will optimize habitats for wildlife production and public recreation.
- c. Property taxes will be paid on acquired properties, and compatible production activities will generate incomes for local economies.
- d. The properties are expected to be managed to minimize needs for future public funding.

C. PRIORITIES

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

The Council identified 9 statewide priorities. This proposal addresses these as follows:

- a. **Ongoing programs.** TNC has been acquiring and managing prairies for 50 years in Minnesota. More importantly, we will be building collaboration and capacity among other partners in accelerating enhancement activities on existing public lands.
- b. **Multiple conservation benefits.** In addition to protecting, restoring and enhancing prairies, this proposal will provide public access, encourage private adoption of conservation grazing, facilitate collaboration with conservation partners, and improve surface and ground water by restoring grasslands that cleanse waters of pollutants.

- c. **Leverage other funds.** TNC will provide private funds for this project, and will apply for funding from several sources, including: Nat'l Fish and Wildlife Foundation, North American Wetlands Conservation Act, & Natural Resources Conservation Service.
- d. **Allow public access.** All lands acquired will be open for public hunting and fishing and other compatible recreational uses.
- e. **Urgent opportunities that will be lost.** Prairies and grasslands are being converted every day in Minnesota. With about 90,000 acres of prairie still unprotected in Minnesota, every lost acre is a huge lost opportunity.
- f. **Restore and enhance state lands.** The proposal will greatly accelerate prescribed fire and invasive species control on state lands in 3 focus areas.
- g. **Use a strategic planning process.** By working with multiple partners, we will be using several priority-setting processes, based on the best available science.
- h. **Consider rare species.** The most at-risk suite of plant and animal species are those found in grasslands. This proposal will specifically benefit them.
- i. **Provide better public access for outdoor opportunities.** In addition to providing access, this project will improve local hunting and wildlife-watching opportunities.

The Council also identified the following (paraphrased) priority actions for the Forest-Prairie Transition ecoregion and the Prairie ecoregion of the state where this project may be implemented. These actions, and the ways this proposal addresses them are:

- a. *Protect wetland/upland complexes, or convert agricultural lands to wetland/upland to enhance or restore existing habitat complexes.* This project will focus on grassland/wetland complexes including protection of 2000 acres, restoration of 500 acres from ag lands to wetlands and/or grasslands, and enhancing 8000 acres.
- b. *Protect, enhance and restore remnant native prairie, Big Woods forests and oak savanna.* Emphasis will be on existing native prairie, wetland, and savanna habitats.
- c. *Restore or enhance habitat on public lands.* Virtually all of the 8000 acres proposed for enhancement under this proposal will be on existing public lands.
- d. *Protect, restore and enhance shallow lakes.* This project does not specifically target shallow lakes, but we will coordinate with other partners in the focus areas.

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

Priorities are set in different manners for 3 various elements of the proposal, as follows.

- Selection of focus areas. We will select 3 focus areas for this prairie conservation work based upon: presence of high concentration of native prairie and grassland/wetland complexes, a compatible DNR Wildlife office, potential for other partner involvement (organizations and programs) and geographic distribution.
- Selection of tracts for fee-title acquisition. Within the above focus areas, steering committees of partners will be formed to guide the work of the partnership. These committees will identify key lands for conservation activities, including protection, restoration and enhancement, and preferred partner responsibilities.
- Selection of tracts for enhancement activities will be the task of the above committees.

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

The strategic planning that this collaborative will use includes the standard elements of setting goals, objectives, strategies, tactics and monitoring/review. The long-term goal is protection of

all remaining unprotected prairies, permanent protection of an additional 500,000 acres of restored grasslands, and annual management of 300,000 acres of protected grasslands.

Science informs this process at multiple points. First, the **data** used in decision-making is a function of scientific data collection. Second, this data is used in **modeling** to identify needed landscape size, for instance, that accounts for home-range and life-cycle needs of animals like blue-winged teal and prairie-chicken. Third, the **strategies and tactics** proposed to be used have been developed and refined by scientists to demonstrate their effectiveness. Finally, results will be **monitored** and tactics adjusted to ensure programs are accomplishing goals.

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.**

Protect: the project will protect with fee title acquisition 2000 acres of native prairie, wetlands, other valuable grasslands and associated cropland for restoration.

Restore: we will restore 500 acres of cropland to prairie-wetland complex.

Enhance: the project will enhance 8000 acres in collaboration with other partners through the use of prescribed fire, invasive species control, etc.

- b. What species will be helped?**

A variety of animal species will be helped, including the following Species of Greatest Conservation Need as identified in the state's Wildlife Action Plan: grasshopper sparrow, northern pintail, upland sandpiper, American bittern, sedge wren, bobolink, marbled godwit, burrowing owl, dickcissel, eastern meadowlark, greater yellowlegs, greater prairie chicken, elk, least shrew, prairie vole, Franklin's ground squirrel, American badger, northern pocket gopher and many invertebrates.

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

In part. The Conservancy has staff located in 5 prairie offices in Minnesota, that will provide significant assistance, particularly in accelerating use of prescribed fire. However, for this project to be successfully implemented requires the addition of temporary and contract staff as described in the proposal.

2. Program Work Location

- a. What percent of your work will be prairie?** All work will occur in Prairie ecoregions. Most of the acres affected (>70%) will be prairie or grassland habitats.
- b. What percent of your work will be wetland?** Between 5% - 30% of acres affected by this proposal will be wetlands within prairie complexes.
- c. What percent of your work will be forest?** None, except incidental.
- d. What percent of your work will be aquatic systems?** None, except incidental.
- e. Is it part of a larger habitat complex? If yes BRIEFLY describe the complex.**
All work will be focused within prairie/grassland/wetland complexes as identified by the Minnesota County Biological Survey, within the Prairie Pothole Region.

4. How We Plan to Use the Funds Requested

- a. **What percent reduction could you accept without rendering your project inoperable?** This project is scalable either up or down. The project proposes to work in 3 focus areas for \$6.3 million. In order to be successful in just one of these focus areas, at least \$2 million would be required, with obviously lower results.
- b. **Have you also applied to the Outdoor Heritage Fund Conservation Partners Grant Program operated by DNR?** Not for this project.
- c. **Where else might you get money for this project?** We will continue to pursue other funding sources, including: NAWCA, state bonding, Heritage Enhancement, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Migratory Bird Fund, and private sources.

4. Personnel Details

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

Human resource needs are variously listed under “personnel”, “contracts”, and “professional services”. The latter 2 are typically contract-for-hire services that perform specific tasks for a fee. Where it makes sense, existing internal staff may be used to provide “professional services” as capacity allows (e.g., existing attorneys to perform legal review of property titles). Otherwise, these will be external, job-specific contracts.

Under “personnel”, there are 5 full- or part-time new positions identified, and one “crew”. These are summarized below.

- Three limited-term biologists for 2 years. These are new field positions that will be employed by TNC or Pheasants Forever and working out of a DNR office (preferably). They will be responsible to: lead local steering committees; identify protection, restoration and enhancement needs and opportunities within the focus area; work with DNR and FWS staff to identify conservation projects on public lands; coordinate enhancement activities on conservation lands; work with landowners on compatible agricultural activities; and related conservation work.
- One half-FTE protection specialist for 2 years. This new position will work with landowners on potential land sales. They will contact known prairie owners, negotiate sale terms, secure appraisals, coordinate due diligence, and bring projects to closing. The person will be responsible for completing transactions on the 2000 acres (up to 10 parcels) proposed for acquisition in this proposal.
- One half-FTE project coordinator for 2 years. This new position – which could be located in a metro or rural location - will oversee implementation of the above activities, and provide administrative support for budget monitoring and reporting. Significant marketing and media outreach will be provided by the Conservancy to highlight the goals and accomplishments of the project to local and statewide constituents, as well as elected officials.
- One new “burn crew” is proposed for the project. A typical burn crew consists of a “burn boss” and 5 crew members who work for a 10-week period in the spring and fall. Their sole responsibility is to plan and implement prescribed fire. We are proposing these as new staff, but are open to alternative arrangements. One alternative that has been proposed is to secure only the seasonal crew members, and use the “burn boss” certifications already present in DNR Wildlife Offices (which are perennially short of crew). We are requesting flexibility in determining which will work best until we know which offices would be the focus areas, so we can best adapt to local needs and resources.