

L-SOHC Questionnaire

Program Request Title: 34 Accelerated Prairie Grassland Restoration and Enhancement Program on DNR lands and Roadsides

Program Manager: Bill Penning, DNR Farmland Wildlife Program Leader

Telephone Number: 651-259-5230

A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:

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

Dedicated funding for the next 24 years provides a unique opportunity for the current generation to build a foundation of publicly owned wildlife habitat and hunting lands that will provide unparalleled opportunity and access for future generations of hunters and outdoor users. In the short-term, land markets are depressed along with the general economy and speculative development pressures have temporarily eased. This will provide a short-term opportunity to extend the state's acquisition buying power. In the long-term, steadily rising land costs, increasing urban development from population expansion, and conversion of existing native habitats to other land uses such as agriculture make protection and restoration of remaining native habitats urgent.

The proposed habitat work enhances or restores degraded habitat. Long time-lags between conservation activities make the job much harder and more expensive. It also lowers the probability of initial success and may require additional follow-up work. Prairies are one of the states rarest and most rapidly diminishing habitats with ongoing threats that diminish the restoration and acquisition potential with each passing year. Goat prairies in the Southeastern Forests will receive special attention for restoration actions and are under imminent threat.

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, 64% are for acquisition, and the remaining 36% is for enhancement and restoration.

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

WMAs and SNAs acquired with these funds will be open to public hunting and other compatible public uses. Roadsides can be enjoyed by travelers along the interstate system. Native Prairie Bank easements are open to scientific and natural observation, education, and research.

C. PRIORITIES

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

Statewide: All WMA and SNAs will be open to the public and provide Minnesotans with greater access to hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreational opportunities. Data gathered by the County Biological Survey Program is used to identify protection and enhancement projects that provide

habitat for Species of Greatest Conservation Need and protect locations of state endangered, threatened and special concern species. Restoration, protection and enhancement activities on WMAs and SNAs are part of long term and ongoing programs that use scientifically based conservation planning to determine program goals and priorities.

Regional: This project will protect and enhance some of the few remaining acres of native prairie, including remnant goat prairies in SE Minnesota. This project will also restore, or reconstruct, prairie to create larger complexes of habitat.

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

WMA acquisitions follow the priorities set by the WMA land acquisition bi-annual spending plan customized for each LSOHC planning section. Individual enhancement and restoration projects on WMAs are solicited from Area Wildlife Managers, prioritized by the Assistant Regional Wildlife Manager and then compiled into a statewide list of priorities based upon funding and capacity. Roadsides Program priorities promote highly visible projects on publically protected ROWs that are associated with public lands open to hunting, and that educate the public, landowners and other highway authorities. Goat prairie management priorities were determined by the sites with the greatest need for immediate management.

Since 1987 the County Biological Survey Program (MCBS) has been collecting data on the location of rare plant and animal species. Native prairie sites of outstanding and high biodiversity significance, as identified by MCBS, become the highest priority for protection and enhancement. Sites are identified by MCBS as priorities for protection because they contain rare and endangered plant and animal species, high quality native plant communities, and key habitats for Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) identified in the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP).

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

Science- based strategic planning employs a four-part circular sequence that includes assessment of current conditions (Where are we?), identification of desired conditions (Where do we want to go?), determining challenges and needed strategies to attain the desired conditions (How do we get there?), and assessment of accomplishments (Did we make it?).

This approach is employed in the Department of Natural Resources 2005 Long Range Plan for the Ring-necked Pheasant in Minnesota and the 2006 Duck Recovery Plan that provides much of the framework for this proposal. These plans identified the current status of Minnesota pheasant and waterfowl populations and recreational use, established statewide harvest objectives, identified the challenges to be met in achieving those objectives, proposed specific strategies for habitat restoration and protection to achieve those objectives, and selected specific metrics for evaluating progress.

Minnesota’s State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) includes a problem assessment (chapter 4, page 38 SWAP) that identifies habitat loss and degradation as the predominant challenges facing prairie Species in Great Conservation Need (SGCNs). SWAP identifies 139 SGCNs alone in the Prairie Parkland Province. SWAP also identifies prairie as a key habitat in 11 different ecological subsections within the State. Prairie, as a habitat type, contains more SGCNs than any other habitat in Minnesota. Goal I of SWAP is to stabilize and increase SGCN populations statewide (SWAP pg. 36). Key to the conservation of species dependant on native prairie is to protect and enhance remaining prairies and to reconstruct additional habitat.

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.**

Restoration and enhancement activities on approximately 29,000 ac of WMA, SNA and state forest will include: prescribed burning; mowing or shearing of woody vegetation; planting, seeding or encouraging natural regeneration; herbicide treatments; and others. Approximately 2,200 ac of prairie grasslands and wetlands will be permanently protected by fee acquisition and permanent easements.

- b. What species will be helped?**

A wide variety of grassland nesting species such as ring-necked pheasant, mallard, blue-winged teal, bobolink, grasshopper sparrow, greater prairie chicken, etc. Rattle snakes, six-lined racerunners, and wild turkeys will benefit from goat prairie management. Many native species of plants will benefit from management activities such as burning and woody encroachment management. The State Wildlife Action Plan identifies 139 species of greatest conservation need within the prairie parkland province. Many of these species will benefit from the work proposed.

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

d.

Yes, MN DNR has the organizational structure to carry out this proposal if funds are received. While most work will be done with vendor contracts, a limited number of positions are needed to accomplish the proposed work.

The DNR has the organizational structure...

2. Program Work Location

- a. What percent of your work will be prairie? 100%**
- b. What percent of your work will be wetland? 0%**
- c. What percent of your work will be forest? 0%**
- 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.**

Generally speaking these projects are all part of the larger prairie grassland landscape. Most restoration and enhancements projects occur on existing WMAs and SNAs which are habitat complexes of varying size.

3. How We Plan to Use the Funds Requested

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

All of the work being proposed is scalable and can be adjusted based upon funding with the exception of the WMA roving crew. To be effective the crew must be fully staffed and equipped.

Elimination of the crew would impact our ability to accomplish prescribed burning and other difficult to contract activities.

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 Division of Ecological Resources is proposing a \$13 million bonding proposal this upcoming Legislative Session, \$5 million which would be used for native prairie acquisition. The division has and will continue to seek funding from LCCMR and federal funds such as State Wildlife Grants for the protection, restoration and enhancement of prairie.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife is proposing a \$24.5 million bonding proposal this upcoming Session, \$12.5 million would be used for WMA acquisition, and \$2 million for development.

4. Personnel Details

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

Project element	Title/name	FTE	Location	Existing or new
WMA Acquisitions	Land Acq. Specialist	.25	Office	New
SNA Acquisitions	Natural Resources Specialist	.5	Office	Existing staff that work exclusively on special project funds
Eco Resources Habitat Work	Natural Resources Specialist	3.5	Field	1.5 FTE are existing positions that are funded largely by special funding, 2.0 FTE are new positions to add needed capacity for additional workload
	NR Tech and Laborers	1.25	Field	.75 FTE are seasonal crew positions that are hired each field season
WMA/AMA Habitat Work	Habitat Dev. Specialists	2	Field (1.2) Office (.8)	New – plan and execute habitat development on WMAs
WMA Roving Crews	NR Spec Sr	.75	Field	New - burn/habitat work
	Laborer	4.5	Field	New – burn/habitat work