

## **L-SOHC Questionnaire**

**Program Request Title: 35 Lower Mississippi River Habitat Restoration Partnership**

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

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

Prompt action is needed to protect and restore habitat that has been degraded in critical areas along the Mississippi River for fish and wildlife, including 82 species listed as endangered, threatened, or special concern. Channel modifications and levees along the lower end of the Zumbro and Root Rivers continues to fragment the lower tributary floodplains at their connection to the Mississippi River, resulting in a loss of wetlands, floodplain forest, and prairie. Development along the Vermillion and Lower Cannon Rivers continues to fragment floodplain forests and impact bluff landscapes. Locks and dams combined with excessive sediment from the Minnesota River watershed continue to degrade the river above Lake Pepin, with high turbidity and lack of a low water cycle preventing the growth of aquatic vegetation which provides critical habitat for fish and wildlife. Acting now will protect these critical areas from further degradation and provide opportunities to improve habitat connectivity and restore wetlands, forests, and prairies for fish and wildlife that live and migrate along the Mississippi River corridor.

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

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

Seventy-six percent of the budget is for acquisition (1,055 acres plus 1 FTE totaling \$4,209,000), 17% for restoration (750 acres, plus 1 FTE totaling \$910,000) and 7% for design and engineering plans for island construction and water level drawdowns (\$400,000). Design and engineering is a necessary first step in restoring an additional 1,000 acres in Mississippi River Pool 2 and Pool 3 (St. Paul to Red Wing). Once design and engineering plans are complete, an additional funding source will be needed to construct islands and implement drawdowns.

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

The parcels identified in this proposal are for fee title acquisition and would be open to public hunting, fishing, hiking, and other outdoor recreational activities. Many of these parcels are adjacent to existing public lands and when acquired will increase the size and connectivity of existing public use areas. There may be future situations where landowners choose permanent conservation easements instead of fee title acquisition. Hunting and fishing may be allowed on those parcels, however, they would remain under private ownership and access would be determined by the landowner. It is important to note that forest, wetland, and prairie restoration on these sites will connect habitats in the general area which will improve fishing and hunting opportunities overall, as well as habitat for rare species. Islands and backwaters of the Mississippi River in Pools 2 and 3 would provide quality public hunting and fishing opportunities in close proximity to the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

### **C. PRIORITIES**

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

This program helps meet the Council's statewide and regional priorities for the Southeast Forest Section by focusing on the protection and restoration of conservation corridors along the Mississippi River floodplain and tributaries. It will fill gaps between corridors and increase the size of contiguous forest, prairie, and wetland areas. It will be an important step in restoring the Root and Zumbro Rivers to their floodplains and will protect critical shoreline areas. Channels and backwaters of the Mississippi River above Lake Pepin will be improved by dredging, island construction and water level drawdowns to increase depth and restore aquatic vegetation which provides critical habitat for fish and wildlife. It will protect sites of high biodiversity significance in the Vermillion and Lower Cannon River areas from encroaching development and protect habitat for species in greatest conservation need as identified in *Minnesota's State Wildlife Action Plan, Tomorrow's Habitat for the Wild and Rare (Tomorrow's Habitat Plan)*.

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

Our priorities are as follows: acquisition and restoration of parcels that provide outstanding biodiversity significance; parcels that are adjacent to existing state or federal lands that when acquired and restored will increase habitat connectivity; and parcels in the project area where the opportunity for acquisition will be lost if we do not take immediate action. Parcels meeting multiple criteria are the highest priority.

Design and engineering plans for islands and water level drawdowns are essential before channels and backwaters of the Mississippi River in Pool 2 and Pool 3 (St. Paul to Red Wing) can be restored. This work can be done in phases, and would be prioritized as follows: 1) Pool 3 drawdown and Pool 2 islands; 2) Pool 2 drawdown and Pool 3 islands.

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

Numerous science-based planning efforts were used to provide the scientific justification for the projects identified in this proposal (list provided in original proposal). These studies outline the scientific and technical basis and need for floodplain restoration, water level management, and island construction projects along the Mississippi River corridor. These activities are considered essential to restoring the health of the Mississippi River system, and will provide benefits not only to these specific locations, but also to the Mississippi River system from the Twin Cities to the Gulf of Mexico.

In addition, a stakeholder driven effort involving citizens and technical experts has developed indicators of restoration success for the Mississippi River upstream of Lake Pepin. This effort is part of the Mississippi Makeover Project, and resulted in indicators for water clarity, sedimentation, aquatic vegetation, fish, invertebrates, and waterfowl. Scientifically based targets were established for each indicator based on historical and current information, reference locations, and modeling results. The projects identified in this LSOHC proposal for Mississippi River Pool 2 and Pool 3 will help meet those targets, and a monitoring program will be established to measure progress.

**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 of fee title or permanent conservation easements from willing sellers. Landowner bill of rights have been signed for most of the parcels listed in this proposal.
- Forest restoration including site preparation, tree planting, invasive species control, and timber stand improvement.

- Prairie restoration including site preparation and seeding, mowing, and prescribed burns.
- Wetland restoration including scrapes, ditch plugs, and invasive species removal.
- Develop design and engineering plans for island construction and drawdowns.

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

Popular game species including deer, turkey, and ruffed grouse will benefit from increases in floodplain and upland forests and prairies. Ducks, geese, furbearers including muskrat, beaver, mink and otter will benefit from increased wetland habitats. Fish including walleye, bluegill, crappie, largemouth bass, northern pike, catfish, and other species will have greater access to spawning and overwintering habitat. A number of state-listed rare species have been identified in lands included in this project, including bald eagles and timber rattlesnakes. In addition, there are 156 species in greatest conservation need within the Blufflands Subsection, many of which will benefit from protecting and restoring native habitats.

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

This proposal includes funding for two FTE's. With these positions, we would have the capacity to complete the work being proposed. It is important to note this proposal also utilizes the expertise and resources of a variety of partners. Third party vendors will handle the acquisition process. State and federal agencies will work with Soil and Water Conservation Districts and other partners to develop restoration plans that would be contracted to outside vendors (such as Minnesota Conservation Corps) for implementation.

**2. Program Work Location**

- a. **What percent of your work will be prairie?** 4%
- b. **What percent of your work will be wetland?** 39%
- c. **What percent of your work will be forest?** 57%
- d. **What percent of your work will be aquatic systems?** Proposal is for design and engineering plans for island construction and drawdowns, so the percent was not included in the total. If construction is funded in subsequent years, over 1,000 acres (approximately 50% of current proposal) would be in aquatic systems.
- e. **Is it part of a larger habitat complex? If yes BRIEFLY describe the complex.**  
Yes, this proposal focuses on critical habitat areas along the Mississippi River corridor from the Twin Cities to the Iowa border. These areas include backwaters and channels of the Mississippi River between St. Paul and Red Wing, and the lower tributary reaches of the Cannon, Zumbro, and Root Rivers. Protection of these key habitats along the Zumbro River will connect to an existing 14,000 acres of state conservation lands (State Forest and Wildlife Management Areas) and 14,000 acres within the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. Lands along the Root River will connect to 1,300 acres of existing state conservation lands (Root River and Mound Prairie WMA, Mound Prairie SNA, MNDOT Wetland Bank, portions of the Doer Memorial Hardwood Forest) and 26,000 acres of Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge lands.

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

- a. **What percent reduction could you accept without rendering your project inoperable?** 20%. This would allow us to acquire and restore 7 high priority

parcels (approximately 900 acres), hire one FTE for two years (including professional services), and develop island and drawdown design plans for one Pool.

**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?**

There are federal programs that could help accomplish the island and drawdown work outlined in this proposal. The Federal Environmental Management Program (EMP) provides funding for habitat restoration projects on the Mississippi River from the Twin Cities to St. Louis. Projects on federal lands are funded at 100% federal cost, while projects on non-federal lands require a 35% cost share. The island construction projects identified in this proposal could potentially be completed with 35% cost share; however, these projects would need to compete for limited funding with projects in other states along the Mississippi River. The process of project selection takes several years and funding is not certain.

Also, the Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program (NESP) was authorized by Congress in 2007 and could potentially provide 100% federal funding for the island construction and drawdown projects identified in this proposal. However, funding for NESP is tied to the Inland Waterways Trust Fund and is not anticipated to be available until 2018. In addition, projects would undergo a competitive prioritization and ranking process and funding is uncertain.

**4. Personnel Details**

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

The proposal includes two new field staff positions that would be DNR employees stationed at partner facilities (SWCD, TNC). Positions include an Acquisition Development Specialist and Habitat Restoration Specialist. Specific duties are as follows:

The Acquisition Development Specialists primary responsibilities are to establish and maintain relationships with individual landowners and conducting all transactional functions. They will be responsible for record keeping and due diligence associated with the acquisition process. Initially the specialist will work closely with local conservation staff from SWCDs and DNR to become familiar with pending and potential projects. Existing staff will introduce the specialist to landowners during this period of transition. The specialist will be the primary contact for private landowners within the project areas serving as a liaison for all partners. The acquisition specialist will also work closely with the habitat restoration specialist.

The Habitat Restoration Specialist will be responsible for conducting initial habitat assessments and developing comprehensive restoration and management plans for each site. They will work closely with partners to develop site based goals that are consistent with overall project and landscape conservation goals. Plans will clearly state short and long-term habitat management needs and describe methods necessary to achieve habitat goals. Project partners will be engaged for specific projects as needed for input on methodology, programmatic assistance and monitoring. The Specialists will be responsible for developing habitat management and restoration work plans. They will complete tasks outlined in the work plan directly or via the contracting process, and will be responsible for developing request for bid material and contract oversight using existing standards and practices.