

L-SOHC Questionnaire

Program Request Title: 38 Prairie Heritage Fund

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A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:

- 1. Why there is an urgent need to act NOW?** The threats to wildlife habitat in the farmland regions of Minnesota are constant and increasing. Development pressures from urbanization, industry (e.g. wind, gravel), and agriculture put our existing habitats in constant jeopardy. Minnesota is also losing significant acreage of grassland habitat (approximately 70,000 acres last year) in the farmland region of Minnesota due to expiring CRP contracts. To put this in perspective, 70,000 acres of grassland has the same footprint as a one mile wide strip of grassland stretching continuously from Minneapolis to Albert Lea. For these reasons, it is vital to provide permanent, high quality habitat complexes on a landscape level to protect and maintain wildlife populations. In addition, providing a place for Minnesotans to hunt, trap, fish and otherwise recreate in the outdoors are urgent needs, and needs we can deliver right now.

B. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

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

\$3.44M for fee title, \$500,000 for restoration and the remainder is for personnel direct to achieving the accomplishments proposed.

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

All lands acquired will be donated to the state of Minnesota for enrollment into the Wildlife Management Area System and will be open to the public for hunting, birding, trapping and other outdoor recreational activities consistent with the WMA system.

C. PRIORITIES

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

This effort directly protects, restores or enhances prairie grasslands, wetlands and habitat for game and wildlife. In cooperation with DNR Managers, we use existing data (e.g. County Biological Survey, HAPET Thunderstorm maps, Restorable wetlands inventory, and protected lands GIS layers), to identify, prioritize, and permanently protect prairie grassland and wetland habitats that improve habitat function for wildlife.

The work of this proposal is consistent with many of the strategies and objectives of existing plans including the *Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan*, the *Long-range plan for the ring-necked pheasant in Minnesota*, *Long-range Duck Recovery Plan*, *North American Waterfowl Management Plan*, *Partners in Flight Physiographic Area Plan for the Tallgrass Prairie*.

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

PF evaluates each parcel in conjunction with the local DNR Area Managers and consider the following:

1. Does the parcel fit the objectives of the wildlife management area system?
2. Does the parcel build upon existing grassland/wetland habitats?
3. Does the parcel add value to the existing grassland/wetland habitats (e.g. does it increase function)?
4. Are there significant habitat features? (e.g. shoreline, riparian, remnant prairie, wetland restoration potential, outlet structure access, grassland enhancement/restoration potential, does it connect habitats)
5. Are there significant or unique plant or animal communities that would be protected or enhanced (e.g. County Biological Survey site)?
6. Are there other important benefits to Minnesota (e.g. water quality, access, etc)

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

The farmland region of Minnesota has largely been converted with 99% of our prairies converted, and a significant percentage of our wetlands drained or degraded. Fragmentation of habitats is a significant issue. The science and strategy of habitat restoration in this part of Minnesota is to build functional complexes of habitat where it once existed. By blending the knowledge of how natural prairie systems function with identifying opportunities to increase and improve an existing prairie complex, we are planning and investing in a better future for prairie wildlife in Minnesota. We mention the Grassland Bird Area Concept in our proposal as a concept we use as a basis for making priority decisions. This is a science-based approach to strategically restoring functional grassland habitats and essentially is what we are doing in how we prioritize parcels. In most instances we are upgrading or building towards upgrading an area towards higher habitat function (e.g. moving from a class 3 to a class 2 grassland bird conservation area).

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.

All work to identify priority tracts, engage willing sellers, appraise, survey, close and acquire priority parcels as WMA's in accordance with LSOHC and contract guidance. In addition, we will restore acquired croplands to diverse grasslands and wetlands to the fullest extent. Enhancement to existing prairie grasslands and wetlands will also occur as determined by the DNR Manager and PF Biologists. Enhancements could include undesirable woody cover removal, water control structures, inter-seeding to open up grasslands and increase diversity, managed grazing, invasive species control, or any other activity that improves the diversity and health of the prairie-wetland habitat complex. We will use as diverse a seed mixture as reasonable for the site to achieve diversity and quality functional habitat using plants native to Minnesota.

b. What species will be helped?

Grassland species that will benefit from this project may include, but are not limited to: dickcissel, Henslow's sparrow, sedge wren, pheasants, blue-winged teal, mallards, upland sandpiper, northern shoveler, short-eared owl, bobolink, prairie

chicken, and the grasshopper sparrow. Where wetlands are restored, similar waterfowl species, along with marsh wrens, sora, marbled godwit, Wilson's phalarope, American bittern, and other wetland associated species of birds will benefit. In addition, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and insect species will be positively impacted by habitat restoration and protection.

Where opportunities arise to protect a piece of remnant native prairie or other significant plant community as identified by the County Biological Survey, an entire community of species can be protected and enhanced.

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

Yes. We are delivering similar accomplishments in the current fiscal year and have added staff capacity in Minnesota to assist with delivery of our current and future accomplishment and delivery obligations.

Currently, we have more projects with willing sellers than we have funding to complete. Thus, we are confident that we have proposed accomplishments and requested funding at levels that we can deliver.

In addition, Pheasants Forever's national headquarters and national grant department reside in White Bear Lake, Minnesota. This is an asset that can be called upon should any capacity issues arise.

2. Program Work Location

a. What percent of your work will be prairie? 85%

b. What percent of your work will be wetland? 10%

c. What percent of your work will be forest? Up to 2.5%

d. What percent of your work will be aquatic systems? Up to 2.5%

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

Yes. We continually try to build upon existing investments in public/private habitat to create a higher functioning complex. We consider many factors in filtering projects (we turn down many parcels offered) and first and foremost is where does it fit in with existing or potential habitat and does the protection effort add significant value to the habitat complex (e.g. the Grassland Bird Conservation Area Concept). In many instances we are working with DNR Area Managers and our local PF Chapters to add to Wildlife Management Area units purchased in years past.

3. How We Plan to Use the Funds Requested

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

We will work with whatever is approved to deliver high quality wildlife habitat that is open to all Minnesotans to enjoy.

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

Yes. The work proposed here is distinct from what is requested in the CPL Grants Program.

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

Funding sources could include Minnesota DNR, Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, private donors, Pheasants Forever Chapters, North American Wetlands Conservation Act Funding, seller donations, or other foundation or granting institution.

4. Personnel Details

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

All personnel requested will be for documented direct to project costs. This includes all aspects of acquiring & restoring lands acquired as WMA's under this work plan. PF has recently added (12/1/09 start) a Director of Conservation Programs position designed to build capacity to deliver the wildlife habitat mission of Pheasants Forever. Other staff positions that would be involved are our regional biologists, Sr. Field Coordinator, and national office grants department staff.