

Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Fiscal Year 2022 / ML 2021 Request for Funding



Date: May 27, 2020

Program or Project Title: Protecting Minnesota's Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance (HA06)

Funds Requested: \$5,001,000

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County Locations: Not Listed

Eco regions in which work will take place:

- Northern Forest

Activity types:

- Protect in Easement

Priority resources addressed by activity:

- Habitat

Abstract:

This program will bring focused conservation to one of Minnesota's priority aquatic resources, Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance. These threatened lakes possess outstanding fisheries and provide habitat for a variety of SGCN; yet, at present, no habitat protection program specifically targets these priority resources. Through this proposal, the Minnesota Land Trust will protect through perpetual conservation easements two miles of shoreland and 960 acres of habitat associated with the top 10% of these lakes in northeast and northcentral Minnesota.

Design and scope of work:

Minnesota's lakeshore systems comprise one of the most biologically important habitats in the state for fish, game and wildlife. Yet, these systems are highly threatened due to intense shoreland development and non-compatible management. Development and disturbance of Minnesota's remaining sensitive shoreland continues to be a threat identified in many of the State's resource protection plans, including the most recent One Watershed One Plans that are in development across the state.

In a refinement of the Minnesota Land Trust's successful Critical Shorelands program (recommended for funding across 5 phases by LSOHC), this proposal focuses on a subset of critical lakeshore systems in northeast and northcentral Minnesota – Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance. Although successful conservation programs have emerged around the protection of two statewide lake system priorities – 1. cisco (tullibee) lake protection by the Northern Waters Land Trust and Minnesota Land Trust, and 2. wild rice lakes by BWSR through the RIM Wild Rice program – a major gap in protection exists. A third conservation priority, lakes ranked by the Minnesota DNR as having outstanding biodiversity significance, has no protection program specifically targeting it. It is this gap in the state's lake protection toolbox that our proposal aims to fill.

To preserve this important component of Minnesota's aquatic natural heritage, MLT proposes to target the top 10% of these "Lakes of

Outstanding Biological Significance” and protect their significant shorelands through conservation easements. These lakes represent the best of the best aquatic and shoreland habitat, and are characterized by exceptional fisheries (both game and non-game), high aquatic plant richness and floristic quality, and populations of endangered or threatened plant species and imperiled lake bird species. This work builds on the past success of MLT’s Critical Shorelands Program.

Through this proposal, the Land Trust will protect 2 miles of threatened shoreland and 960 acres of associated upland habitat by acquiring permanent conservation easements from willing landowners. Project priorities and conservation opportunities will be informed by a combination of GIS analyses to score and rank high-quality target parcels and consultation with local partners. We will continue to target projects that help complete gaps in existing protected land, contain the highest-quality habitat, and provide the greatest leverage to the state. The Land Trust will employ its market-based RFP system for identifying, prioritizing and completing conservation easements in this program area.

Outcomes from this project include: 1) healthy populations of fish, waterfowl, and Species in Greatest Conservation Need; 2) maintaining water quality of aquatic resources; 3) increased participation of private landowners in habitat projects; and 4) enhancement of prior state and local investments made in shoreland and forest conservation in the region. The Land Trust will strategically target target complexes of protect lands in which these outcomes are maximized.

How does the proposal address habitats that have significant value for wildlife species of greatest conservation need, and/or threatened or endangered species, and list targeted species:

This program will preserve critical shoreland and associated upland habitats adjacent to a prioritized subset of Minnesota’s Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance in northeast and north-central Minnesota that are essential to maintaining both healthy populations of the region’s fish and wildlife populations and maintaining water quality of these aquatic resources. This program will address a noted protection gap associated with these priority lakes, and afford a level of protection to some of the state’s highest quality game and non-game fisheries. The program will provide habitat protection for an array of SGCN, including American Woodcock, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Golden-winged Warbler, Winter Wren, and Black-backed Woodpecker. Numerous plans have identified the protection of these habitats as a conservation priority for Minnesota, including the Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan, DNR Aquatic Management Area program, the State Conservation and Preservation Plan, DNR Strategic Conservation Agenda, and Outdoor Heritage Fund: A 25 Year Framework. The central goal of this program is to protect high-quality critical shoreland habitat by securing permanent conservation easements in strategic locations along priority lakes and rivers, leaving a lasting legacy of protected habitat complexes.

What is the degree of timing/opportunistic urgency and why it is necessary to spend public money for this work as soon as possible:

Development and disturbance of the State’s remaining sensitive shoreland habitat continues to be a threat identified in many of the State’s resource protection plans. DNR and other scientists indicate that the shoreland zone is one of the most biologically diverse and important habitat types for a variety of wildlife species. It is also one of Minnesota’s most threatened resources due to the intensity of shoreland development and non-compatible management.

The anticipated COVID-19 lull in the real-estate market is expected to give many landowners an opportunity to reflect on the future of their lands, providing a new but potentially narrow window of time to invest in these shoreland protection projects in the next 2-3 years.

Describe how the proposal uses science-based targeting that leverages or expands corridors and complexes, reduces fragmentation or protects areas identified in the MN County Biological Survey:

Approximately 407 lakes within the program area are characterized by the DNR as Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance. Through this program, the Land Trust will focus its conservation work on the top 10% of these lakes. Using the DNR’s Outstanding Biological Significance Lakes GIS layer for northeast and northcentral Minnesota, lakes were prioritized based on the following criteria: 1) level of existing protection (% of private/public lands associated with each lake), 2) ecological significance (MBS and NHIS data, % of sensitive shoreline by lake, and Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan), and 3) opportunity (# of private parcels greater than 35 acres for each lake). Sensitive Lakeshore inventories have been completed in Cass, Crow Wing, Aitkin and Itasca counties.

These Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance were subsequently assessed to determine whether they were eligible for protection through existing programs focusing on Cisco (NWLT/MLT Fisheries Program) or wild rice (BWSR Wild Rice RIM Program). This prioritized list of target lakes will be further refined in consultation with local partners and resource experts. A scoring and ranking system is being developed that considers factors such as parcel size, ecological context, relationship to other protected land, SGCN, and habitat quality that will be used to prioritize individual parcels. The Sensitive Lakeshore Identification Manual (DNR 2016) will inform targeting of parcels associated with lakes in counties where a sensitive shoreland inventory has not yet been completed.

Which sections of the Minnesota Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan are applicable to this project:

- H2 Protect critical shoreland of streams and lakes
- H6 Protect and restore critical in-water habitat of lakes and streams

Which other plans are addressed in this proposal:

- Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025
- Outdoor Heritage Fund: A 25 Year Framework

Describe how your program will advance the indicators identified in the plans selected:

Once secured, conservation easements will protect in perpetuity the important shoreland, headwaters and associated upland habitats adjacent to some of Minnesota's premier aquatic resources. Habitat management plans will be developed and provided to the landowners for use in enhancing and maintaining each protected parcel's important habitat. Protection of these critical habitats advances a primary goal identified by the Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan through stabilization of Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). Protection and stewardship of private forest lands, wetlands, and grasslands will promote conservation of natural lands, fisheries, and wildlife as a priority statewide action identified in the DNR Strategic Conservation Agenda.

Which LSOHC section priorities are addressed in this proposal:

Northern Forest:

- Protect shoreland and restore or enhance critical habitat on wild rice lakes, shallow lakes, cold water lakes, streams and rivers, and spawning areas

Describe how your program will produce and demonstrate a significant and permanent conservation legacy and/or outcomes for fish, game, and wildlife as indicated in the LSOHC priorities:

Protecting Minnesota's Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance Program will focus its effort on protecting some of the most important fisheries resources in Minnesota and will help preserve this State's proud angler heritage. When many residents endorsed the Legacy Amendment, they indicated a strong interest in seeing our water resources protected. This program takes a science based and targeted approach to protecting shoreland habitat on Northern Minnesota's Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance.

Shorelines provide critical habitat for nesting, feeding and resting for wildlife such as loons, trumpeter swans, wood ducks, hooded mergansers, and great blue and green herons. Protection of sensitive shoreline habitat on Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance will ensure that these high quality life requisites are provided in perpetuity.

In addition, this program will secure permanent conservation easements on priority lands that also serve to build complexes of protected habitat. This will enhance the State's prior investments in habitat protection and leave a larger, lasting legacy thanks to the permanency of the easements and the much-needed participation of Minnesota's landowners in our State's conservation efforts. Our program is cultivating a high conservation ethic and developing effective tools for landowners to protect their land and waters. It is also creating a great shared responsibility essential to maximizing our investment to achieve our targeted protection goals.

Relationship to other funds:

- Not Listed

Describe the relationship of the funds:

Not Listed

Does this program include leverage in funds:

Yes

The Land Trust encourages landowners to fully or partially donate the value of conservation easements. The leverage portion of the easement acquisition line item (\$800,000) is a conservative estimate of value we expect to see donated by landowners participating in the program.

Per MS 97A.056, Subd. 24, Any state agency or organization requesting a direct appropriation from the OHF must inform the LSOHC at the time of the request for funding is made, whether the request is

supplanting or is a substitution for any previous funding that was not from a legacy fund and was used for the same purpose:

This request is not supplanting or substituting for any previous funding. This is entirely new work.

Describe the source and amount of non-OHF money spent for this work in the past:

Not Listed

How will you sustain and/or maintain this work after the Outdoor Heritage Funds are expended:

The land protected through conservation easements will be sustained through the best standards and practices for conservation easement stewardship. The Minnesota Land Trust is a nationally-accredited and insured land trust with a very successful stewardship program that includes annual property monitoring, effective records management, addressing inquiries and interpretations, tracking changes in ownership, investigating potential violations and defending the easement in case of a true violation. Funding for these easement stewardship activities is included in the project budget.

In addition, the Land Trust prepares for each landowner a habitat management plan that provides recommendations for use in ecologically managing the property over time. The Land Trust actively encourages landowners to manage their properties in line with the conservation easement, and works with landowners to address any financial or informational obstacles that stand in the way of them doing so.

Explain the things you will do in the future to maintain project outcomes:

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2025	MLT Long-Term Stewardship and Enforcement Fund	Annual monitoring of all easement projects	Enforcement as necessary	

Identify indicator species and associated quantities this habitat will typically support:

DNR staff, in consultation with a variety of experts in NGOs and other agencies, have compiled a select group of species and associated quantities to be used as indicators. The metrics are derived from existing data sources and/or scientific literature, but are necessarily gross averages; they are not accurate at a site-specific scale. Therefore, they are not intended to be used to score or rank requests, but represent the best information we have for immediate support to the Council's objective.

1. Forests

Two species have been identified to represent various forest habitats:

Ovenbird: Are found in relatively mature forest but can also be found in younger forests. While territories vary in size and may overlap, an average of 16 pairs for every 40 acres may be expected.

Golden-winged Warbler: Often associated with shrubland habitat and regenerating forests, a variety of forest habitats are required (a matrix of shrubby wetlands and uplands, regenerating forests, and mature forests). While territories vary in size, roughly 6 pairs for every 40 acres may be expected.

2. Aquatic Species

The information below is based on general averages for potential aquatic indicator species in Minnesota, and does not capture the variability inherent in populations of fish and mussels. Natural populations, including healthy populations with good habitat, vary among locations, and also rise and fall within lakes and rivers.

Trout: 40 lbs per acre.

Lakes: Walleye (2 adults/acre); Muskie (0.2 adults/acre); Northern Pike (10 adults/acre).

Activity Details

Requirements:

If funded, this proposal will meet all applicable criteria set forth in MS 97A.056 - **Yes**

Is the land you plan to acquire (easement) free of any other permanent protection - **Yes**

Do you anticipate federal funds as a match for this program - **No**

Land Use:

Will there be planting of corn or any crop on OHF land purchased or restored in this program - **No**

Will the eased land be open for public use - **No**

Are there currently trails or roads on any of the acquisitions on the parcel list - **Yes**

Describe the types of trails or roads and the allowable uses:

Most conservation easements are established on private lands, many of which have driveways, field roads and trails located on them. Often, these established trails and roads are permitted in the terms of the easement and can be maintained for personal use if their use does not significantly impact the conservation values of the property. Creation of new roads/trails or expansion of existing ones is typically not allowed.

Will the trails or roads remain and uses continue to be allowed after OHF acquisition - **Yes**

How will maintenance and monitoring be accomplished:

Existing trails and roads are identified in the project baseline report and will be monitored annually as part of the Land Trust's stewardship and enforcement protocols. Maintenance of permitted roads/trails in line with the terms of the easement will be the responsibility of the landowner.

Will new trails or roads be developed or improved as a result of the OHF acquisition - **No**

Will the land that you acquire (fee or easement) be restored or enhanced within this proposals funding and availability? - **Yes**

Land Use:

Have you received OHF dollars in the past through LSOHC? - **Yes**

Past appropriations and spending to date:

Apprp Year	Approp Amount Received	Approp Amount Spent to Date	Leverage as Reported in AP/th>	Leverage Realized to Date	Total Acres Affected in AP	Total Acres Affected to Date	Program Complete and Final Report Approved?
2010	816000	692900	0	2589040	1000	1330	Yes
2013	820000	742200	0	939400	700	911	Yes
2015	1690000	1612500	0	2490500	1000	643	Yes
2017	1700000	1192000	230000	115900	330	1056	No
2018	1094000	28600	165000	0			No

Accomplishment Timeline

Activity	Approximate Date Completed
Acquire conservation easements: 1) identify priority landowners, 2) negotiate, draft and complete easements, and 3) dedicate funds for long-term stewardship.	June 30, 2025

Budget Spreadsheet

Total Amount of Request: \$5,001,000

Budget and Cash Leverage

Budget Name	LSOHC Request	Anticipated Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Personnel	\$228,000	\$0		\$228,000
Contracts	\$82,000	\$0		\$82,000
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	\$0	\$0		\$0
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	\$0	\$0		\$0
Easement Acquisition	\$4,000,000	\$800,000	Landowner donation of easement value.	\$4,800,000
Easement Stewardship	\$288,000	\$0		\$288,000
Travel	\$15,000	\$0		\$15,000
Professional Services	\$326,000	\$0		\$326,000
Direct Support Services	\$62,000	\$0		\$62,000
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	\$0	\$0		\$0
Capital Equipment	\$0	\$0		\$0
Other Equipment/Tools	\$0	\$0		\$0
Supplies/Materials	\$0	\$0		\$0
DNR IDP	\$0	\$0		\$0
Total	\$5,001,000	\$800,000		\$5,801,000

Personnel

Position	FTE	Over # of years	LSOHC Request	Anticipated Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
MLT Land Protection Staff	0.60	4.00	\$228,000	\$0		\$228,000
Total	0.60	4.00	\$228,000	\$0		\$228,000

Amount of Request: \$5,001,000
 Amount of Leverage: \$800,000
 Leverage as a percent of the Request: 16.00%
 DSS + Personnel: \$290,000
 As a % of the total request: 5.80%
 Easement Stewardship: \$288,000
 As a % of the Easement Acquisition: 7.20%

How did you determine which portions of the Direct Support Services of your shared support services is direct to this program:

In a process that was approved by the DNR on March 17, 2017, Minnesota Land Trust determined our direct support services rate to include all of the allowable direct and necessary expenditures that are not captured in other line items in the budget, which is similar to the Land Trust's proposed federal indirect rate. We will apply this DNR-approved rate only to personnel expenses to determine the total amount of direct support services.

What is included in the contracts line?

Funds in the contract line are for the writing of habitat management plans via qualified vendors, and outreach to landowners through SWCDs and other local partners.

Does the amount in the travel line include equipment/vehicle rental? - Yes

Explain the amount in the travel line outside of traditional travel costs of mileage, food, and lodging:

Land Trust staff regularly rent vehicles for grant-related purposes, which is a significant cost savings over use of personal vehicles.

I understand and agree that lodging, meals, and mileage must comply with the current MMB Commissioner Plan: - Yes

Describe and explain leverage source and confirmation of funds:

The Land Trust encourages landowners to fully or partially donate the value of conservation easements. The leverage portion of the

easement acquisition line item is a conservative estimate of value we expect to see donated to the Land Trust.

Does this proposal have the ability to be scalable? - Yes

Tell us how this project would be scaled and how administrative costs are affected, describe the "economy of scale" and how outputs would change with reduced funding, if applicable:

Because this program endeavors to protect and restore/enhance multiple parcels, it is scalable. Less funding will result in fewer protected acres and lost opportunities. In addition, some of the administrative and outreach costs are more fixed. As such, there is an economy of scale to working within one appropriation.

What is the cost per easement for stewardship and explain how that amount is calculated?

The average cost per easement to fund the Minnesota Land Trust's perpetual monitoring and enforcement obligations is \$24,000. This figure is derived from MLT's detailed stewardship funding "cost analysis" which is consistent with Land Trust Accreditation standards. MLT shares periodic updates to this cost analysis with LSOHC staff.

Has funding for these positions been requested in the past? - Yes

Please explain the overlap of past and future staffing and position levels previously received and how that is coordinated over multiple years?

FTEs listed in the proposal are an estimate of the personnel time required to deliver the grant outputs included in this proposal. An array of staff may work on projects to complete legal review, sub-contracts, negotiating with landowners, drafting conservation easements, completing baseline reports and managing the grant. MLT's basis for billing is the individual Protection project we work on, ensuring allocation to the appropriate grant award. And by using a timesheet-based approach we use only those personnel funds actually expended to achieve the goals of the grant.

Output Tables

Table 1a. Acres by Resource Type

Type	Wetlands	Prairies	Forest	Habitats	Total
Restore	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	0	0	960	960
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0	960	960

Table 2. Total Requested Funding by Resource Type

Type	Wetlands	Prairies	Forest	Habitats	Total
Restore	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Easement	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$5,001,000	\$5,001,000
Enhance	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Total	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$5,001,000	\$5,001,000

Table 3. Acres within each Ecological Section

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	Northern Forest	Total
Restore	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	0	0	0	960	960
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0	0	960	960

Table 4. Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	Northern Forest	Total
Restore	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Easement	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$5,001,000	\$5,001,000
Enhance	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Total	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$5,001,000	\$5,001,000

Table 5. Average Cost per Acre by Resource Type

Type	Wetlands	Prairies	Forest	Habitats
Restore	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Easement	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$5,209
Enhance	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0

Table 6. Average Cost per Acre by Ecological Section

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	Northern Forest
Restore	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Easement	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$5,209
Enhance	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0

Automatic system calculation / not entered by managers

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

2 miles

I have read and understand Section 15 of the Constitution of the State of Minnesota, Minnesota Statute 97A.056, and the Call for Funding Request. I certify I am authorized to submit this proposal and to the best of my knowledge the information provided is true and accurate.

Outcomes

Programs in the northern forest region:

- Healthy populations of endangered, threatened, and special concern species as well as more common species *Shorelands are protected from development and fragmentation This program will permanently protect 800 acres of the most biologically outstanding shoreland in northern Minnesota and approximately 2 miles of undeveloped shoreline. Measure: Acres/shoreland protected.*

Parcel List

Explain the process used to select, rank and prioritize the parcels:

Solicitation for potential projects employs a diverse strategy of direct outreach to landowners in high priority conservation areas and coordinated outreach with conservation partners including lake associations, Soil and Water Conservation Districts and others. Leads for potential projects are pursued following initial assessment and scoring against criteria identified in established conservation plans. Criteria based scoring systems provide a standardized set of data from which multiple projects can be compared relative to each other and individual projects can be compared against a baseline. Scoring systems are a set of data, not a final, complete decision making tool. Local expertise and experience, programmatic goals, timelines, available resources, capacity, and other more subjective factors might also come into play in project selection and decision making.

The attached scoresheet provides an approach to criteria based scoring that considers: 1) Ecological Integrity/Viability as current status; 2) Threat/Urgency as a future scenario if protection is not afforded; and 3) Cost reflecting the overall value realized through the acquisition of a conservation easement (including a reflection of donative value). Ecological Integrity weights property size, condition, and context equally (at least as an initial starting point). The three primary factors, when taken together, provide a good estimate of long-term viability for biodiversity at the site: 1) Size of the parcel to be protected, 2) Condition of the habitat on the parcel, and 3) its Landscape context (both from a protection and ecological standpoint).

Section 1 - Restore / Enhance Parcel List

No parcels with an activity type restore or enhance.

Section 2 - Protect Parcel List

No parcels with an activity type protect.

Section 2a - Protect Parcel with Bldgs

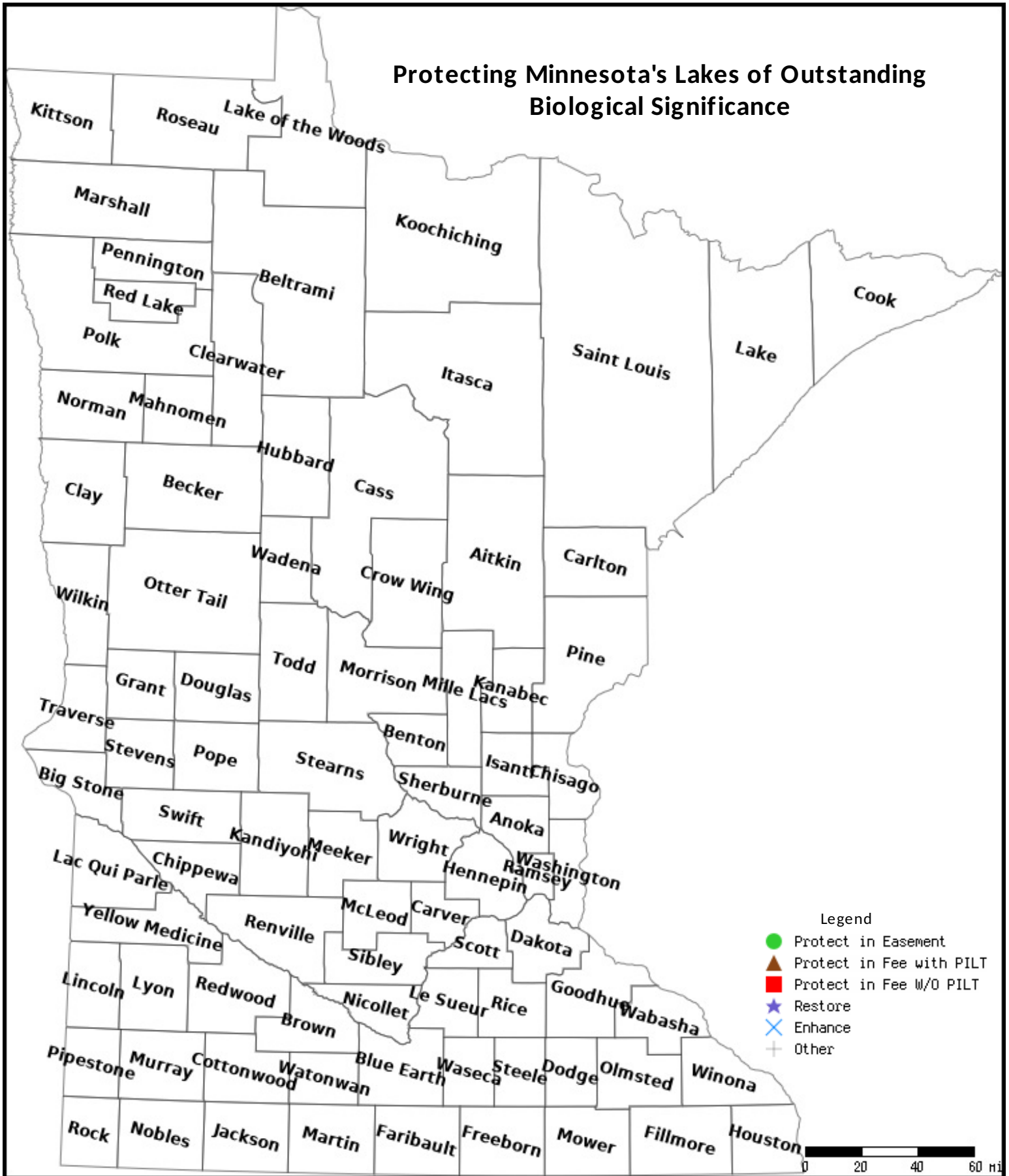
No parcels with an activity type protect and has buildings.

Section 3 - Other Parcel Activity

No parcels with an other activity type.

Parcel Map

Protecting Minnesota's Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance



Data Generated From Parcel List



Protecting Minnesota's Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance

The Minnesota Land Trust is requesting \$5,001,000 for the Protecting Minnesota's Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance program.

This program will bring focused conservation to one of Minnesota's priority aquatic resources, Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance. Through this proposal, the Minnesota Land Trust will protect through perpetual conservation easements two miles of shoreland and 960 acres of habitat associated with the top 10% of these lakes in northeast and northcentral Minnesota.

This program will preserve critical shoreland and associated upland habitats adjacent to a prioritized subset of Minnesota's Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance in northeast and north-central Minnesota that are essential to maintaining both healthy populations of the region's fish and wildlife populations and maintaining water quality of these aquatic resources.

Outdoor Heritage Fund Request:

\$5,001,000 for 960 acres of perpetual conservation easements.

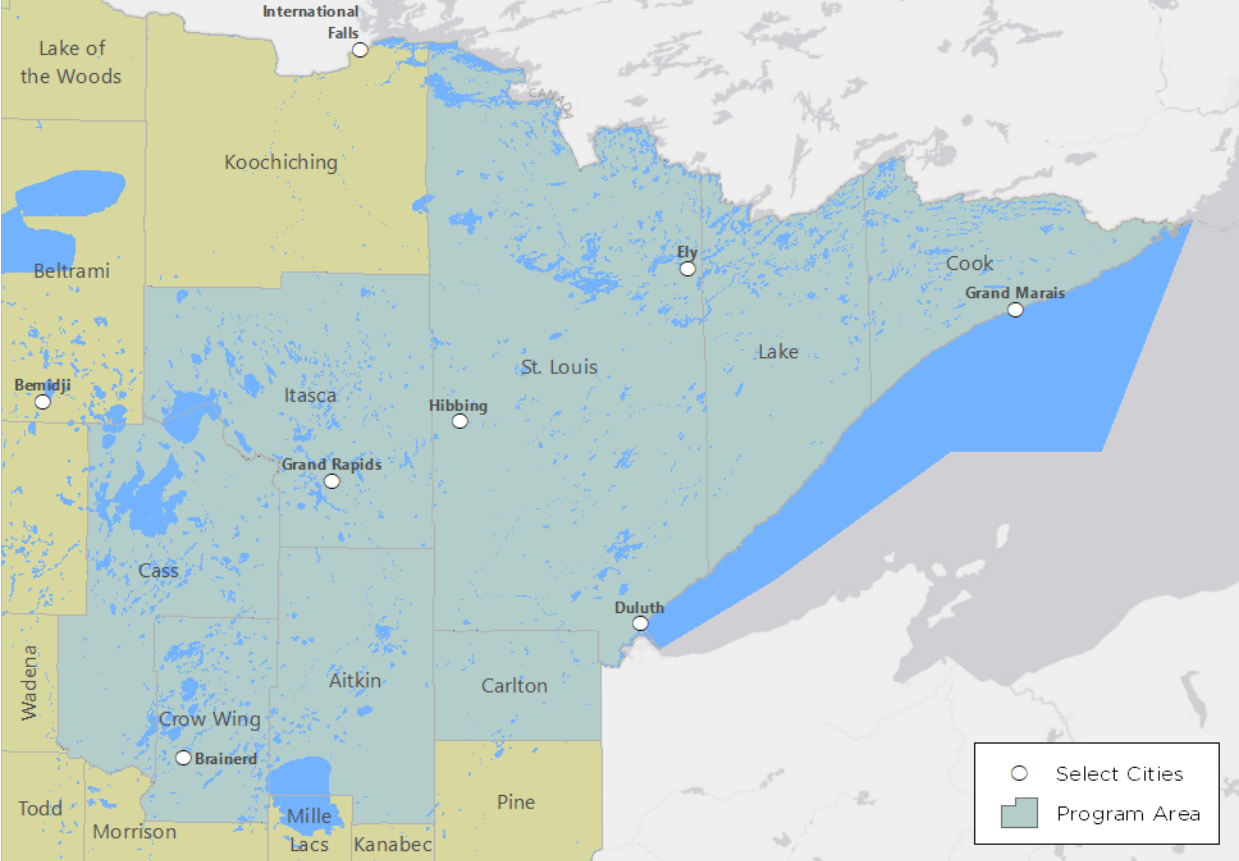
The Minnesota Land Trust is a nationally-accredited conservation organization with a twenty-nine year history of protecting Minnesota's most unique wildlife habitats around the state.

For more information about this proposal, please contact Wayne Ostlie, Director of Land Protection, at 651-917-6292 or wostlie@mnland.org.



How Does the Program Support State Goals?

This program will address a noted protection gap associated with these priority lakes, and afford a level of protection to some of the state's highest quality game and non-game fisheries. Numerous plans have identified the protection of these habitats as a conservation priority for Minnesota, including the *Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan*, *DNR Aquatic Management Area program*, the *State Conservation and Preservation Plan*, *DNR Strategic Conservation Agenda*, and *Outdoor Heritage Fund: A 25 Year Framework*.



What has Been Accomplished to Date?

The Minnesota Land Trust has been protecting properties in the program area for many years through our related Critical Shorelands program.

Complete (Critical Shorelands Phases I - III):

Completed 21 conservation easements within program area protecting 2,884 acres of habitat and 18.6 miles of shoreline.

In Progress (Critical Shorelands Phases IV & V):

3 conservation easements have been completed protecting 1,056 acres of habitat and 7.4 miles of shoreline.

The Critical Shorelands Program has generated considerable awareness and interest among landowners in protecting these places. Within the program area alone, landowners have collectively contributed over \$6.1 million in easement value as leverage to the \$4.2 million investment from the Outdoor Heritage Fund.

Mission

The Minnesota Land Trust protects and restores Minnesota's most vital natural lands in order to provide wildlife habitat, clean water, outdoor experiences, and scenic beauty for generations to come.

Contact Us

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MINNESOTA LAND TRUST

A Decision Support Tool for Prioritizing Conservation Easement Opportunities

The Minnesota Land Trust often employs within its conservation program areas an RFP (Request for Proposals) model to both identify high-quality projects and introduce a level of competition into the easement acquisition process. Below, we briefly discuss how the system works and the framework put in place to sort the varied opportunities that come before us.

How the Ranking System Works

The parcel ranking framework employed through the Minnesota Land Trust's RFP process is intended as a **decision support tool** to aid in identifying, among the slate of landowners submitting bids for conservation easements, the most ecologically significant opportunities for the price. Using this framework, the Land Trust and its partners use an array of weighted data sets tailored to the specific circumstances inherent in a program area to identify those worthy of consideration.

It is important to note that this parcel ranking framework enables the Land Trust to rank projects *relative* to one another. That's important to do, but it's also important to understand how a project (or suite of projects) relates to the ideal situation (i.e., a project that is of exceptional size, condition and superb landscape context). If, for example, an RFP generated 20 proposals in a program area, the framework would effectively sift among them and identify the relatively good from those relatively bad. However, this information alone would not determine whether any of those parcels were of sufficient quality to pursue for protection (all may be of insufficient quality to warrant expenditure of funds). To solve this problem and make sure ranked projects are high priorities for conservation, we step back and evaluate them relative to the ideal - i.e., is each project among the best opportunities for conservation we can expect to find in the program area?

As part of its proposals to LSOHC, the Land Trust included easement sign-up criteria that laid out at a general level the framework utilized by the organization. Below is a more detailed description of the process the Land Trust utilizes in ranking potential parcels relative to one another, and identifying those with which a conservation easement will be pursued. We also include a ranking form illustrating the representative weighting applied to each criteria. These weightings will be refined as we move forward in applying this approach in each program area.

The Framework

We evaluate potential projects based on two primary factors: ecological significance and cost. Both are assessed independent of one another.

Factor 1: Ecological Significance

The Ecological Significance score is determined by looking at 3 subfactors, each weighted equally (as a default). Each of these constitutes 1/3 of the total ecological significance score.

Subfactors:

- **Size or Quantity** – the area of the parcel to be protected (how big is it?), length of shoreline, etc. The bigger the better.
- **Condition or Quality** – the condition of the natural communities and/or target species found on a parcel. The higher quality the better.
- **Landscape Context** – what’s around the parcel, both ecologically and from a protected status standpoint. The more ecologically intact the surrounding landscape the better; the extent to which a parcel builds off of other protected lands to form complexes or corridors, the better.

Note that we have the ability to emphasize one subfactor over another if the specific circumstances warrant it, but we begin with a default standard at the onset. At present, all of our geographies are using the default standard.

Indicators:

A suite of weighted indicators is used to score each parcel relative to each of the above subfactors. Indicators are selected based on their ability to effectively inform the scoring of parcels relative to each of the respective subfactors. Weightings for each criterion are assessed and vetted to ensure that a set of indicators for each subfactor produces meaningful results, then applied across each of the proposed parcels. Finally, we vet and make improvements to the scoring matrix when we identify issues or circumstances where results seem erroneous.

Data sets used for this purpose must offer wall-to-wall coverage across the program area to ensure that bias for or against parcels does not creep into the equation. Where gaps in such coverages exist, we attempt to fill them in to the extent feasible (via field inventory, etc.). Finally, we vet and make improvements to the scoring matrix when we identify issues or circumstances where results seem erroneous.

Factor 2: Cost

Cost is a second major factor used in our consideration of parcels. Although ecological significance is *the* primary factor in determining the merits of a project, our RFP programs also strive to make the greatest conservation impact with the most efficient use of State funds. As such, we look at the overall cost of each project relative to its ecological significance; we also ask landowners to consider donating all or some of their easement value to the cause and to better position their proposals. Many landowners participate in that fashion.

Cost, as a primary factor, is assessed independently of the ecological factors. Given equal ecological significance, a project of lower cost will be elevated over those of higher cost in the ranking. That said, exceptionally high quality projects are likely to be pursued even if no or modest landowner donation is put forward. Alternatively, there are projects offered as full donations that are not moved forward because their ecological significance is not acceptable. The degree to which cost factors into the ranking of parcels relative to one another is made on a case-by-case basis.

MINNESOTA LAND TRUST Lakes of Outstanding Biological Significance Conservation Easement Selection Worksheet		SITE 1	SITE 2	SITE 3	SITE 4	SITE 5	SITE 6	SITE 7	SITE 8	SITE 9	SITE 10	SITE 11	SITE 12	Notes
COUNTY														
100 Pts	ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE													
Weighting Factor	Size/Abundance of Habitat (33 points)													
	a) Size (33 pts): Acres of Habitat to be Protected by an Easement													
	SUBTOTAL:	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Weighting Factor	Quality of Natural Resources to be Protected by the Easement (33 points)													
	a) Habitat Quality (28 pts): Quality of Existing Ecological Systems (Terrestrial & Aquatic)													
	b) Imperiled Species (5 pts): Occurrence of Documented Rare Species on Parcel													
	SUBTOTAL:	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Weighting Factor	Landscape Context (34 points)													
	Current Status (30 points)													
	a) Protection Context (15 points)													
	i. Size of Contiguous Protected Lands (8 pts)													
	ii. Amount of Protected Lands within 3 miles of Property													
	: Protected Land within 0.5 miles of Property (4 pts)													
	: Protected Land 0.5-3 miles from Property (3 pts)													
	b) Ecological Context (15 points)													
	i. Size of Contiguous Ecological Habitat (8 pts)													
	ii. Amount of Ecological Habitat within 3 miles of Property													
	: Ecological Habitat within 0.5 miles of Property (4 pts)													
	: Ecological Habitat 0.5-3 miles from Property (3 pts)													
	Future Potential (4 points)													
	a) Conservation Plan Context (2 pts)													
	b) Amount of Existing Activity (2 pts)													
	SUBTOTAL:	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	TOTAL ECOLOGICAL VALUE POINTS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
COST														
	i. Bid amount (\$)/acre	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
	ii. Estimated donative value (\$)/acre	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
	TOTAL ACQUISITION COST (\$)	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -

KEY	
	Priority
	Possible
	Out