



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Accelerating Habitat Conservation in Southwest Minnesota - Phase 3

ML 2024 Request for Funding

General Information

Date: 06/23/2023

Proposal Title: Accelerating Habitat Conservation in Southwest Minnesota - Phase 3

Funds Requested: \$7,471,000

Confirmed Leverage Funds: -

Is this proposal Scalable?: Yes

Manager Information

Manager's Name: Wayne Ostlie

Title: Director of Land Protection

Organization: Minnesota Land Trust

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Location Information

County Location(s): Rock, Martin and Jackson.

Eco regions in which work will take place:

- Prairie

Activity types:

- Protect in Easement
- Restore
- Enhance

Priority resources addressed by activity:

- Wetlands
- Prairie

- Habitat
- Forest

Narrative

Abstract

The Minnesota Land Trust proposes to permanently protect 1,100 acres of high quality habitat in southwest Minnesota by securing conservation easements within scientifically prioritized habitat complexes by filling key unmet gaps in the available land protection toolbox. Working with willing landowners the Land Trust will use its innovative bid model to maximize conservation benefit and financial leverage in project selection. The Land Trust, in cooperation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, will restore/enhance 196 acres of wetlands and associated prairies to benefit SGCN and waterfowl populations.

Design and Scope of Work

The plight of prairies and wetlands in southwest Minnesota is well-documented; less than 2% of native prairie remains and 90% of wetlands have been lost. Habitat loss and degradation threaten wildlife populations and contribute to the decline of the 116 SGCN that utilize the wetlands, streams and prairies across the region.

Since the inception of Minnesota's Prairie Plan in 2010, targeted land protection and restoration action by a large number of conservation organizations and agencies has resulted in significant conservation gains across southwest Minnesota. In 2020, nearly a decade into its implementation, the Land Trust engaged a broad cross-section of these organizations to identify what challenges remain to realizing that Plan. Through this conversation, several significant challenges were identified: 1) land protection tools currently available are not sufficiently broad to address the full spectrum of need; high priority easement projects don't always align with conservation easement programs currently available; 2) R/E funding availability is a limiting factor to some key partners, and 3) high priority areas for conservation (identified in Minnesota's Wildlife Action Network) do not always align with the Prairie Plan and are not being addressed. Our program aims to address these gaps in the Southwest Minnesota conservation framework by marrying the Land Trust's unique set of tools and expertise with funding through the Outdoor Heritage Fund.

In Phase 1 of this Program, the Land Trust has committed all of its easement acquisition funding to current projects; ten additional projects are in the initial stages of development and await Phase 2 funding. The Program also has 126 acres of restoration/enhancement work complete and additional acres underway.

Phase 3 will continue these accomplishments. Working with willing landowners, the Land Trust will protect 1,100 acres of priority wetland, prairie and associated upland habitat through conservation easements. The Land Trust's easement program has greater flexibility than others currently available in Southwest Minnesota through USFWS, MN DNR and BWSR, and can be tailored to address key conservation opportunities that otherwise would be left on the table. Land protection actions through this proposal will focus on: 1) priority areas within the Prairie Plan left orphaned by current conservation easement programs, and 2) conservation priorities identified in the WAN that are not encompassed by the Prairie Plan. The Land Trust will employ its criteria-based ranking system and market-based approach to the acquisition of conservation easements. This strategic approach targets projects that help fill gaps in existing public ownership, are of the highest ecological value, and provide the greatest leverage to the State's funding investment. The Land Trust will seek donated easements whenever possible but also may fully purchase easements that help complete key complexes as necessary.

Restoration and enhancement activities will target priority protected lands. The Land Trust in cooperation with

USFWS will restore and enhance 196 acres of important wetland, riparian and prairie habitat on permanently protected USFWS easement and Waterfowl Production Area lands, including an oxbow restoration for the benefit of Topeka shiner.

Explain how the proposal addresses habitat protection, restoration, and/or enhancement for fish, game & wildlife, including threatened or endangered species conservation

This program addresses LSOHC priorities by protecting shallow lakes, wetland/grassland complexes, prairie streams, and shoreland that provide critical habitat for Minnesota's wildlife, especially its migratory waterfowl and associated species. Minnesota's wetlands are essential to our wildlife health and diversity. This program directly benefits SGCN and other important game and non-game wildlife species by minimizing the potential threats to their habitat caused by detrimental agricultural practices or imprudent land management. The wetland habitat complexes that will be targeted through the ranking system will include a mosaic of wetlands, grasslands and woodlands. Priority projects will include high or outstanding habitat as identified in Minnesota Biological Survey data or that provide habitat for state- and federally listed species, like the Topeka shiner. Projects will also be located near other protected lands to help build larger habitat complexes comprised of both public and private lands.

The vast majority of this landscape is in private ownership. For that reason, working with private owners on protected land restoration strategies is key to successful conservation in this region. Finally, we will work closely with partners in the region to identify those habitat complexes where private land protection can make a significant contribution to existing conservation investments.

What are the elements of this proposal that are critical from a timing perspective?

Although much conservation activity has taken place in this landscape for more than 10 years, we now have a unique opportunity to fill a conservation gap and increase landscape-level impacts to protect important wetland and grassland complexes. With an aging landowner population, high land prices placing pressure from conversion on remaining habitat, organizational momentum, and strong local partnerships, the time to amplify this important conservation niche across the region is now. To focus our work, we have completed an analysis to identify important wetland/grassland complexes in this landscape based on the nexus of high-quality habitat, existing protected areas and restorable agricultural lands. These complexes include a mosaic of wetland, prairie/grassland, and forest habitats, as well as agricultural land.

Describe how the proposal expands habitat corridors or complexes and/or addresses habitat fragmentation:

This program is focused on procuring conservation easements and restoring prairie and wetland habitats on easement and fee protected lands within priority complexes of wetlands and associated upland habitats, as guided by the State Wildlife Action Plan, Duck Plan and Prairie Plan. Specific parcels available for easement acquisition are evaluated relative to each other to identify priorities among the pool of applicants. This relative ranking is based on three primary ecological factors [1) amount of habitat on the parcel (size) and abundance of SGCN; 2) the quality or condition of habitat; and 3) the parcel's context relative to other natural habitats and protected areas] in addition to cost. The program serves to build upon past conservation investments in the program area, expand the footprint of existing protected areas (WMAs, WPAs, etc.), facilitate the protection of habitat corridors and reduce the potential for fragmentation of existing habitats. In addition, the USFWS (a cooperator in this program) will receive OHF funding through MLT to further reduce effects of fragmentation through restoration of prairie, wetlands and other habitats. Minnesota Biological Survey data is a cornerstone to our assessment of potential

conservation easement acquisitions. We also conduct field visits to further identify and assess condition of habitats prior to easement acquisition because many private lands were not formally assessed through MBS.

Which Conservation Plans referenced in MS97A.056, subd. 3a are most applicable to this project?

- Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan
- Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025

Explain how this proposal will uniquely address habitat resilience to climate change and its anticipated effects on game, fish & wildlife species utilizing the protected or restored/enhanced habitat this proposal targets.

This proposal addresses habitat resilience to climate change by focusing on prairie stream and wetland complexes including adjacent upland acres. Protection of existing complete wetland and prairie stream complexes and the restoration of upland acres adjacent to prairie streams and wetlands provides opportunities to build connected corridors of complete habitat systems that waterfowl, ground nesting birds, and SGCN species depend on.

The Minnesota Land Trust’s restoration program uses a two-prong approach to addressing habitat resilience to climate change: 1) we prioritize projects that most support regional climate adaptation strategies such as improving migration corridors or habitat complexes, and 2) we include adaptive specifications in every project, such as using climate forward seed mixes and designing wetland features for future precipitation patterns.

Which LSOHC section priorities are addressed in this proposal?

Prairie

- Protect, enhance, or restore existing wetland/upland complexes, or convert agricultural lands to new wetland/upland habitat complexes

Describe how this project/program will produce and demonstrate a significant and permanent conservation legacy and/or outcomes for fish, game, and wildlife, and if not permanent outcomes, why it is important to undertake at this time:

The Minnesota Land Trust will focus its protection, restoration and enhancement work on key wetland, prairie and other habitats within the Upper Minnesota River Valley, Prairie Coteau and other regions of Southwest Minnesota, guided by the Minnesota Prairie Plan, Duck Plan and State Wildlife Action plan. High quality lands are protected through acquisition of perpetual conservation easements; native habitats are restored and enhanced on existing eased lands. We work in partnership with local, state and federal agency and non-profit conservation partners to ensure our activities are complementary to those undertaken by others working in the program area. By doing this, we are building complexes of high-quality protected habitat, reducing fragmentation, and providing for connectivity between core habitat areas that will enable species to move freely.

In obtaining conservation easements (whether by donation or through purchase), we work with willing, conservation-minded landowners. Our landowner bid process will be targeted toward specific areas within our Southwest Minnesota program area identified through the plans listed above. Opportunities within the program area are identified and prioritized based on the potential to contribute toward building a permanent conservation legacy that includes positive outcomes for wildlife and the public. Prairie and wetland habitats on lands protected through conservation easement by the Land Trust or in fee/easement by USFWS (a cooperator in this program) are restored and enhanced by respective parties to elevate their inherent value to wildlife. Both the Land Trust and USFWS are deeply committed to maintaining these investments over time.

Outcomes

Programs in prairie region:

- Protected, restored, and enhanced habitat for migratory and unique Minnesota species ~ *This program will permanently protect 1,100 acres of wetland and upland habitat complexes and restore/enhance 196 acres of wetlands and prairies in the prairie region. Measure: Acres protected; acres restored; acres enhanced.*

What other dedicated funds may collaborate with or contribute to this proposal?

- N/A

Per MS 97A.056, Subd. 24, Please explain 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.

Funding procured by MLT from the Outdoor Heritage Fund through this proposal will not supplant or substitute any previous funding from a non-Legacy fund used for the same purpose.

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

Land protected through conservation easements will be sustained through state-of-the-art standards and practices for conservation easement stewardship. The Minnesota Land Trust is a nationally-accredited 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 cases of a true violation. Funding for these easement stewardship activities is included in the project budget.

In addition, MLT will assist landowners in the development of comprehensive habitat management plans to help ensure that the land will be managed for its wildlife and water quality benefits. MLT (as easement holder) and USFWS (as easement holder and fee owner of respective properties) will work with landowners in an ongoing basis to provide habitat restoration plans, resources and technical expertise to undertake restoration, enhancement and ongoing management of these properties.

Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2029 and in perpetuity	MLT Long -Term Stewardship and Enforcement Fund	Annual monitoring of easements in perpetuity	Enforcement as necessary	-
Every 4-6 years	USFWS	Prescribed fire, tree removal, Invasive species control	-	-

Provide an assessment of how your program may celebrate cultural diversity or reach diverse communities in Minnesota, including reaching low- and moderate-income households:

One of the MLT's core public values is a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We have been engaged in a multi-year-long process to assess how the conservation community—and the Minnesota Land Trust in particular—can better address these issues. To date, we have demonstrated this commitment, when possible, given the funding parameters and our unique role in working with private landowners, including numerous projects to protect the camps and nature centers that serve a diversity of Minnesota youth and a long-term partnership with the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa on wild rice restoration.

In our Southwest Minnesota Program, MLT responded to a request from the Yankton Sioux Tribe and the National Park Service to assist with providing increased protection to Pipestone National Monument, and its unparalleled natural and sacred features. Pipestone National Monument and adjacent USFWS Pipestone Wildlife Management Area contain native high-quality prairie habitat and rock outcrops with biodiversity rarely seen in Southwest Minnesota; because of the pipestone here, this place is a sacred place of peace for the 23 affiliated tribes that come for ceremony and to quarry. To alleviate the threat of encroaching development, the Land Trust is exploring opportunities to protect and restore lands and waters adjacent to and intersection with the Monument. Permanent protection of adjacent lands provides opportunities for tribal members to influence ecological restoration supporting prairie habitat for Species in Greatest Conservation Need, and a path for improving the water quality of the now channelized and seriously impaired Pipestone Creek. The Land Trust is committed to collaborating with the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, local governments, and representatives of the Yankton Sioux and other tribes to protect this sacred and ecologically precious place.

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

Will restoration and enhancement work follow best management practices including MS 84.973 Pollinator Habitat Program?

Yes

Is the restoration and enhancement activity on permanently protected land per 97A.056, Subd 13(f), tribal lands, and/or public waters per MS 103G.005, Subd. 15 or on lands to be acquired in this program?

Yes

Where does the activity take place?

- WPA
- Refuge Lands
- Permanently Protected Conservation Easements

Land Use

Will there be planting of any crop on OHF land purchased or restored in this program?

Yes

Explain what will be planted:

The purpose of the Minnesota Land Trust's conservation easements is to protect and restore/enhance existing high quality natural habitat and to preserve opportunities for future restoration. We restrict agricultural lands and use on the properties. In cases where there are agricultural lands associated with the larger property, we will either exclude the agricultural area from the conservation easement, or in some limited cases, we may target agricultural lands for restoration purposes.

Will neonicotinoid pesticide products be used within any activities of this proposal?

No

Will the eased land be open for public use?

No

Are there currently trails or roads on any of the proposed acquisitions?

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, the conservation easement permits the continued usage of established trails and roads so long as 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 accordance 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 proposal's funding and availability?

No

Explain how, when, and source of the R/E work:

The Land Trust will assess the R/E needs of each parcel protected through this appropriation. Should R/E needs exist, funding for those projects will be built into a forthcoming proposal.

Other OHF Appropriation Awards

Have you received OHF dollars in the past through LSOHC that are current OPEN appropriations?

Yes

Approp Year	Funding Amount Received	Amount Spent to Date	Funding Remaining	% Spent to Date
2023	\$3,071,000	-	-	-
2020	\$3,044,000	\$2,702,300	\$341,700	88.77%
Totals	\$6,115,000	\$2,702,300	\$3,412,700	44.19%

Timeline

Activity Name	Estimated Completion Date
Conservation easements closed or options secured	June 30, 2028
Restoration and enhancement projects completed	June 30, 2028

Budget

Totals

Item	Funding Request	Total Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Personnel	\$500,000	-	-	\$500,000
Contracts	\$861,000	-	-	\$861,000
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$5,500,000	\$550,000	Landowner donation of easement value	\$6,050,000
Easement Stewardship	\$252,000	-	-	\$252,000
Travel	\$26,000	-	-	\$26,000
Professional Services	\$190,000	-	-	\$190,000
Direct Support Services	\$135,000	-	-	\$135,000
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	\$5,500	-	-	\$5,500
Supplies/Materials	\$1,500	-	-	\$1,500
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$7,471,000	\$550,000	-	\$8,021,000

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Funding Request	Total Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
MLT Protection Staff	0.75	4.0	\$300,000	-	-	\$300,000
MLT Restoration Staff	0.5	4.0	\$200,000	-	-	\$200,000

Amount of Request: \$7,471,000

Amount of Leverage: \$550,000

Leverage as a percent of the Request: 7.36%

DSS + Personnel: \$635,000

As a % of the total request: 8.5%

Easement Stewardship: \$252,000

As a % of the Easement Acquisition: 4.58%

Total Leverage (from above)	Amount Confirmed	% of Total Leverage	Amount Anticipated	% of Total Leverage
\$550,000	-	0.0%	\$550,000	100.0%

Detail leverage sources and confirmation of funds:

The Land Trust encourages landowners to fully or partially donate the value of conservation easements to the program. The leverage amount is a conservative estimate of value we expect to see donated by landowners.

Does this proposal have the ability to be scalable?

Yes

If the project received 50% of the requested funding

Describe how the scaling would affect acres/activities and if not proportionately reduced, why?

Land protection outputs would be reduced by 55-65 percent. MLT would expect to protect 4-5 parcels, totaling 500-600 acres. The restoration budget would not be adjusted and outputs would remain the same. Some costs are fixed; we are conservative in reducing stewardship and professional services in the budgeting process.

Describe how personnel and DSS expenses would be adjusted and if not proportionately reduced, why?

Personnel and DSS will be reduced, but less than proportional (~20% reduction). Some costs are fixed and must occur regardless of grant amount. Projects can fail midstream after investment of time. Donation of easement value can inflate the number of projects pursued/completed. Restoration personnel/DSS is retained at 100%.

If the project received 30% of the requested funding

Describe how the scaling would affect acres/activities and if not proportionately reduced, why?

Land protection outputs would be reduced by 30-40 percent. MLT would expect to protect 5-6 parcels, totaling 650-800 acres. The restoration budget would not be adjusted; outputs would remain the same. Some costs are fixed; we are conservative in reducing stewardship and professional services in the budgeting process.

Describe how personnel and DSS expenses would be adjusted and if not proportionately reduced, why?

Personnel and DSS will be reduced, but less than proportional (~40% reduction). Some costs are fixed and must occur regardless of grant amount. Projects can fail midstream after investment of time. Donation of easement value can inflate the number of projects pursued/completed. Restoration personnel/DSS is retained at 100%.

Personnel

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 a coarse 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, subcontracts, 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.

Contracts

What is included in the contracts line?

Restoration and enhancement accounts for \$760,300 of the contract line amount. Additional funds in the contract line are for the writing of habitat management plans via qualified vendors, and engaging respective County Soil and Water Conservation Districts for landowner outreach purposes to facilitate communication of the protection program.

Professional Services

What is included in the Professional Services line?

- Appraisals
- Design/Engineering
- Other : Environmental Assessments, Mineral Assessments, Mapping
- Surveys
- Title Insurance and Legal Fees

Easement Stewardship

What is the number of easements anticipated, cost per easement for stewardship, and explain how that amount is calculated?

The Land Trust expects to close 10 conservation easements through this proposal. The average cost per easement to fund the Minnesota Land Trust's perpetual monitoring and enforcement obligations is \$28,000. This figure is derived from MLT's stewardship funding "cost analysis" which is consistent with Land Trust Accreditation standards. MLT shares periodic updates to this cost analysis with LSOHC staff.

Travel

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

Direct Support Services

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.

Other Equipment/Tools

Give examples of the types of Equipment and Tools that will be purchased?

GPS units, field safety gear, etc.

Federal Funds

Do you anticipate federal funds as a match for this program?

No

Output Tables

Acres by Resource Type (Table 1)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat	Total Acres
Restore	0	185	0	1	186
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	1,100	1,100
Enhance	0	10	0	0	10
Total	0	195	0	1,101	1,296

Total Requested Funding by Resource Type (Table 2)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat	Total Funding
Restore	-	\$947,300	-	\$21,300	\$968,600
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	\$6,449,000	\$6,449,000
Enhance	-	\$53,400	-	-	\$53,400
Total	-	\$1,000,700	-	\$6,470,300	\$7,471,000

Acres within each Ecological Section (Table 3)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Acres
Restore	0	0	0	186	0	186
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	1,100	0	1,100
Enhance	0	0	0	10	0	10
Total	0	0	0	1,296	0	1,296

Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section (Table 4)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Funding
Restore	-	-	-	\$968,600	-	\$968,600
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	\$6,449,000	-	\$6,449,000
Enhance	-	-	-	\$53,400	-	\$53,400
Total	-	-	-	\$7,471,000	-	\$7,471,000

Average Cost per Acre by Resource Type (Table 5)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat
Restore	-	\$5,120	-	\$21,300
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	\$5,862
Enhance	-	\$5,340	-	-

Average Cost per Acre by Ecological Section (Table 6)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest
Restore	-	-	-	\$5,207	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-

Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	\$5,862	-
Enhance	-	-	-	\$5,340	-

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

0

Parcels

Sign-up Criteria?

[Yes - Sign up criteria is attached](#)

Explain the process used to identify, prioritize, and select the parcels on your list:

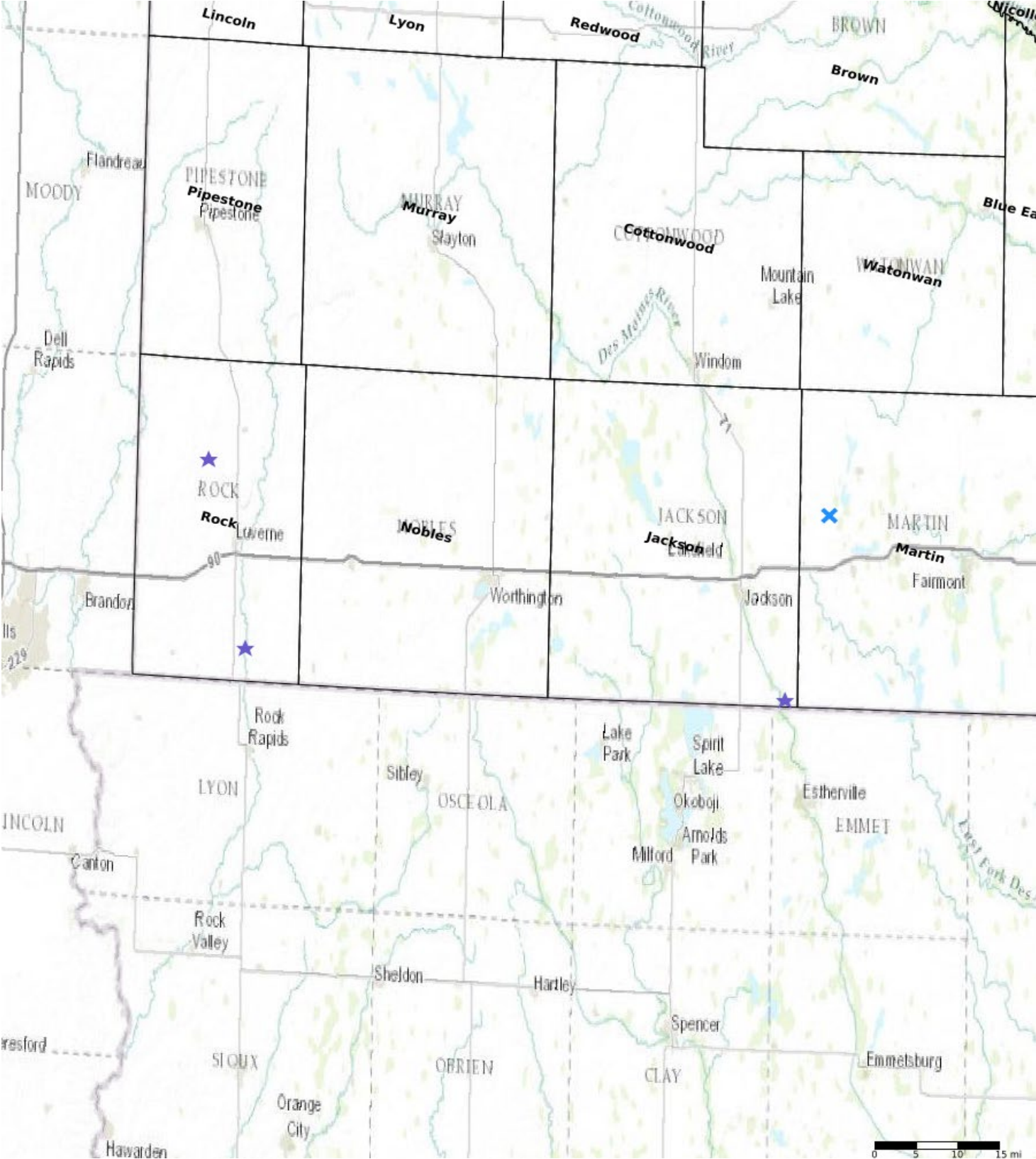
The Land Trust uses a competitive, market-based approach through an RFP process to identify interested landowners and prioritize parcels for conservation easement acquisition. All proposals submitted by landowners are evaluated and ranked relative to their ecological significance based on three primary factors: 1) size of habitat on the parcel; 2) condition of habitat on the parcel; and 3) the context (both in terms of amount/quality of remaining habitat and protected areas) within which the parcel lies. We also ask the landowner to consider contributing all or a portion of fair market value to enable our funds to make a larger conservation impact (see attached sign-up criteria). We contract with local SWCD offices to provide outreach services as a way to connect effectively with local landowners.

Restoration and enhancement work will take place on a WPA and private lands over which MLT and USFWS have secured permanent conservation easements to protect wetlands and associated upland habitat. The projects included in the parcel list were identified as priorities for restoration/enhancement by USFWS staff in their Windom Wetland Management District office.

Restore / Enhance Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection
JEneE	Jackson	10134235	60	\$34,000	Yes
SheE	Martin	10333222	10	\$40,000	Yes
LBos	Rock	10145224	1	\$20,000	Yes
BPFT	Rock	10345207	125	\$666,250	Yes

Parcel Map



- Protect in Easement
- ▲ Protect in Fee with PILT
- Protect in Fee W/O PILT
- ★ Restore
- ✕ Enhance
- ⊕ Other

Accelerating Habitat Conservation in Southwest Minnesota

Phase 3



Request \$6,398,000

Leverage \$500,000

Acres protected 1,150

Acres restored 196

For more information:

Chad Kingstrom

Program Manager

Minnesota Land Trust

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The plight of prairies and wetlands in southwest Minnesota is well-documented; less than 2% of prairie remains and 90% of wetlands have been lost.

Through innovative, out-of-the-box problem-solving, this program: 1) tackles and elevates innovative strategies to advance the Prairie Plan; and 2) focuses on priority conservation areas identified in Minnesota's Wildlife Action Network that fall outside the Prairie Plan and receive little attention. We place an emphasis on maximizing conservation benefit and leveraging of private easement value.

Restoration and enhancement is conducted in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As our program matures, we build on this and other partnerships, elevating the impact and efficiency of our protection and restoration strategies.

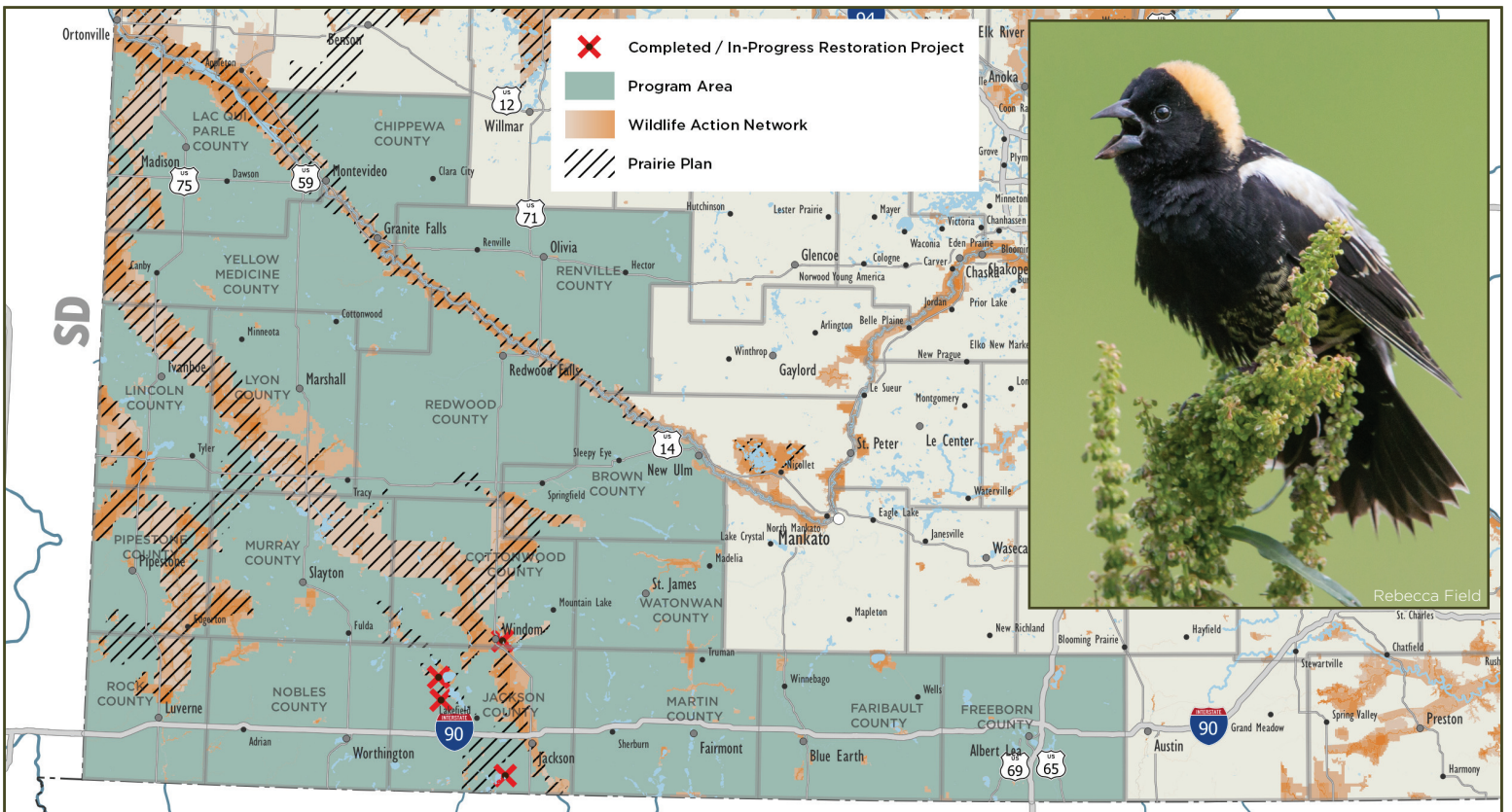
How Does the Program Support State Goals?

This program protects, restores, and enhances some of Minnesota's premier wetland and prairie habitat resources.

- Advances a primary goal identified by Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan through stabilization of Species in Greatest Conservation Need,
- Assists Minnesota's waterfowl population through Minnesota's Duck Action Plan.
- Provides focused attention to a full slate of prairie species through the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan.

What Are the Outcomes?

- Healthy wetland habitat complexes and associated populations of waterfowl, upland birds, and Species in Greatest Conservation Need.
- Improved prairie stream and upland habitat that improves water quality.
- Increased participation of private landowners in habitat projects.



What has Been Accomplished to Date in the Program?

In collaboration with conservation partners in the region, the Land Trust is building complexes of high quality protected habitat, reducing fragmentation, providing for connectivity between core habitat areas and addressing water quality, and invasive species concerns.

In Progress (Phase 1):

All funds for Phase 1 are committed. Four conservation easements will protect 597 acres of habitat and over 7 miles of shoreline designated as Critical Habitat for the federally listed Topeka shiner. To date, 126 acres of restoration/enhancement of wetland and prairie habitats have been completed with 161 additional acres underway.

Planned (Phase 2):

Starting in July 2023, we will begin Phase 2 of the program to protect 600 acres and restore/enhance an additional 200 acres of habitat. A large proportion (80%) of these funds are already allocated.

Contact Us

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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.





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, however because of the amount of hydrological alteration present across southwest Minnesota emphasis on restorable wetlands that provide multiple benefits will be a prominent component of the condition subfactor.

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.

SWMN PROTECTION PROGRAM 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 Parcel 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 Protected by the Easement (33 points)													
	a) Habitat Quality (28 pts): Quality of Existing Ecological Systems (Terrestrial & Aquatic, as appropriate)													
	b) Imperiled Species (5 pts): Occurrences 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													
	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													
	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

SOUTHWEST MN PROTECTION PROGRAM

Conservation Easement Selection Worksheet – Scoring and Criteria

Three primary factors when taken together provide a good estimate of long-term viability for biodiversity: 1) **Size** of the occurrence (species population or example of natural community), 2) **Condition** of the occurrence, and 3) its **Landscape context**. This framework is used widely across the world by a large number of conservation organizations and agencies and here in Minnesota by the Minnesota DNR, USFWS, The Nature Conservancy and others. The Minnesota Land Trust has adopted this practice as well.

In this summary document, we provide an overview of the framework used by the Land Trust in assessing and prioritizing land protection opportunities before the organization.

- 1. Habitat Size (33 points):** Parcels are scored based on acres of habitat to be protected through the easement relative to the largest parcels available for protection in the program area. Although size can pertain to species populations, the size of such populations is often constrained by available habitat. In addition, very little information pertaining to the size of species populations on a given property typically exists, making any determination suspect. Habitat size is a valid indicator in these circumstances.

Scoring: Parcels are scored by how they fall relative to twelve size classes of habitat:

0 pt	≤40 acres
3 pts	41-50 acres
6 pts	51-75 acres
9 pts	76-108 acres
12 pts	109-152 acres
15 pts	153-224 acres
18 pts	225-320 acres
21 pts	321-460 acres
27 pts	661-960 acres
30 pts	961-1300 acres
33 pts	>1300 acres

- 2. Quality of Natural Resources (33 points):** Parcels are scored based on the quality or condition of occurrences of ecological communities (habitat) and imperiled species if known. As with Habitat Size above, population data for imperiled species is often minimal on private lands. As such, the condition of score is heavily influenced by the condition of natural communities on a property. However, we do allocate a modest level of points to the presence of imperiled species if they have been documented on a property.

Scoring: Parcels are scored based on the condition of focal ecological community targets – both terrestrial and freshwater – and presence of imperiled species on the property, as such:

- a) Habitat Quality (28 points) –** The Minnesota Biological Survey natural community element occurrence ranking framework (for terrestrial systems) and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency fish and insect indices of biotic integrity are used to score habitat quality on parcels, as such:

- 0 pts Absence of natural communities; fish/insect IBI = 0-10.
- 4 pts Natural communities averaging D rank; fish/insect IBI = 10-20.
- 8 pts Natural communities averaging CD rank; fish/insect IBI = 20-40.
- 12 pts Natural communities averaging C rank; fish/insect IBI = 50-59.
- 16 pts Natural communities averaging BC rank; fish/insect IBI = 60-69.
- 20 pts Natural communities averaging B rank; fish/insect IBI = 70-79.
- 24 pts Natural communities averaging AB rank; IBI = 80-89.
- 28 pts Natural communities averaging A rank; IBI > 90.

b) Imperiled Species (5 points) – Scoring of the parcel is based on species abundance, as follows:

- 1 pt 1 occurrence
- 3 pts 3

3. Landscape Context (34 points): Parcels are scored based current ecological context of the property and protected lands surrounding it; in addition, points are also allocated based on the likelihood that lands around a parcel will be protected going forward based on the identification of these adjacent lands in respective conservation lands.

Scoring: Parcels are scored based as follows:

a) Protection Context (15 points) – Is calculated based on two subfactors, including size of contiguous protected land (if any) and amount of protected land within 3 miles of the property. Here, we look at two subfactors:

i) Amount of protected land (acres) contiguous with the parcel. Scoring of the parcel is based on the amount of protected land contiguous to the parcel (8 points), as follows:

- 1 pt ≤40 acres of contiguous protected lands
- 2 pts 41-60 acres
- 3 pts 61-100 acres
- 4 pts 101-160 acres
- 5 pts 161-240 acres
- 6 pts 241-400 acres
- 7 pts 401-640 acres
- 8 pts >640 acres

ii) Amount of protected lands within a 3-mile radius of the parcel, whether contiguous or not (7 points). Blocks of habitat nearby but not contiguous can also play a very significant role in the maintenance of biodiversity over the long term. In this assessment, we weight protected lands within ½ mile of the parcel higher than those farther removed, and score them separately.

(a) Amount (acres) of protected land within ½ mile of protected property (4 points) – The amount of protected land within ½ mile of the parcel, scored as follows:

- 1 pt ≤80 acres of protected land
- 2 pts 81-360 acres
- 3 pts 361-640 acres
- 4 pts >640 acres

Amount (acres) of protected land ½-3 miles of the protected property (3 points) –

- 1 pt ≤640 acres of protected land
- 2 pts 641-2560 acres
- 3 pts >2561 acres

b) Ecological Context (15 points) – As with Protection context, ecological context is calculated based on two subfactors, including size of contiguous ecological habitat (if any) and amount of ecological habitat within 3 miles of the property.

i) Amount of ecological habitat (acres) contiguous with the parcel, providing species with direct access to larger blocks of permanent habitat (8 points). Scoring of the parcel is based on the amount of natural ecological habitat contiguous to the parcel, as follows:

- 1 pt ≤80 acres of contiguous habitat
- 2 pts 81-320 acres
- 3 pts 321-640 acres
- 4 pts 641-960 acres
- 5 pts 961-1920 acres
- 6 pts 1921-3840 acres
- 7 pts 3841-7680 acres
- 8 pts >7680 acres

ii) Amount of protected lands within a 3-mile radius of the parcel, whether contiguous or not (7 points). Blocks of habitat nearby, whether contiguous or not play a very significant role in the maintenance of biodiversity over the long term. In this assessment, we weight ecological habitat within ½ mile of the parcel higher than that farther removed, and score them separately.

Amount (acres) of protected land within ½ mile of protected property (4 points) – The amount of protected land within ½ mile of the parcel, scored as follows:

- 1 pt ≤80 acres of protected land
- 2 pts 81-360 acres
- 3 pts 361-640 acres
- 4 pts >640 acres

Amount (acres) of protected land ½-3 miles of the protected property (3 points) –

- 1 pt ≤640 acres of protected land
- 2 pts 641-2560 acres
- 3 pts >2561 acres

c) Future Potential (4 points) – The degree to which the area within which a parcel lies has been identified as a priority for conservation action and the degree to which action is being implemented in that area is a direct indicator of the long-term potential for maintenance of biodiversity associated with a parcel. Lands affiliated with priority areas are more likely to be complemented with additional levels of nearby protected lands than those outside of priority areas. In areas experiencing high levels of development, this factor may carry a significant amount of weight in setting protection priorities.

Scoring: Parcels are scored based on two subfactors: 1) their position relative to priority areas identified in statewide or local planning efforts, and 2) the degree to which action is being implemented within a priority area.

- 0 pts Parcel not within priority area
- 1 pt Parcel within priority area; minimal activity occurring
- 2 pts Parcel within priority area; modest activity occurring
- 3 pts Parcel within priority area; good levels of activity occurring
- 4 pts Parcel within priority area; high levels of activity occurring