



## Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Greenbelt Phase 1

ML 2026 Request for Funding

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### General Information

**Date:** 06/26/2025

**Proposal Title:** Greenbelt Phase 1

**Funds Requested:** \$3,300,000

**Confirmed Leverage Funds:** \$150,000

**Is this proposal Scalable?:** Yes

### Manager Information

**Manager's Name:** Emily Heinz

**Title:** Planning Coordinator

**Organization:** Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District

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### Location Information

**County Location(s):** Chisago and Washington.

**Eco regions in which work will take place:**

Northern Forest

Metro / Urban

**Activity types:**

Protect in Fee

Protect in Easement

**Priority resources addressed by activity:**

Wetlands

## Narrative

### Abstract

This program will permanently protect 300 acres of wetland habitat in the Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District which has experienced considerable habitat loss and is at risk of more land use conversion. The District will implement a targeted greenbelt and habitat protection program on priority parcels identified in the CLFLWD 10-Year Plan, Floodplain Vulnerability Assessment Action Plan, and Natural Resources Inventory. The District will engage with key landowners and utilize conservation easements and fee title acquisitions to connect fragmented habitat corridors. In addition to habitat benefits, this proposal will protect water quality, mitigate flooding, and promote groundwater recharge.

### Design and Scope of Work

**Problem to be addressed:** This proposal will address habitat fragmentation and wetland degradation that resulted from urban/suburban development and agricultural activity.

**Scope of work:** The Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District will protect high priority wetlands through fee title acquisition and easements. The District will hold the easement and manage for wildlife and water quality purposes.

**How priorities were set:** The District utilizes a data-driven approach to prioritizing land protection efforts. Priority areas of the Watershed District are defined in the District's 2022-2031 Watershed Management Plan. These areas are defined based on the presence of MN Biological Survey Sites of Biodiversity Significance, native plant communities, wetlands, groundwater dependent natural resources, pollution sensitivity of near-surface materials, lake phosphorus sensitivity, and altered watercourses. The District has collected additional data to further refine priority parcels within these areas: floodplain vulnerability assessment and flood risk modeling, wetland inventory, and groundwater-dependent natural resources inventory.

**Urgency and opportunity:** The Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District contains 9,579 acres of wetland within its jurisdiction, comprising 17% of the District's total land use. Developed areas comprise 14% of land use, and cultivated cropland comprises 12% of land use in the District. By 2040 the City of Forest Lake is anticipating 15% per decade growth in population, adding over 7,000 residents to its population, and adding almost 5,000 new housing units. The transportation infrastructure along Highway 8 and Interstate 35 are expected to expand to account for increased capacity. Highway commercial development and multi-use development are planned along the intersections of Highway 8, I-35, and Highway 61. A spatial comparison of existing and future (2040) land use maps from the 2019 City of Forest Lake Comprehensive Plan indicate 160 acres of new residential development and 375 acres of commercial development. Minnesota's changing climate and increasing spring precipitation levels create an increased need for landscape resiliency. By protecting undeveloped spaces, particularly wetlands which detain, retain, and purify stormwater runoff, this proposal will increase landscape resiliency.

**What habitat will be affected:** This proposal will primarily protect wetland habitat. Forest, prairie, in-lake, and in-stream habitat may also benefit from the proposed easements and acquisitions.

**How actions will directly protect wetlands:** This proposal will directly protect wetlands through permanent easement and fee title acquisition. This phase of the program involves protection (Phase 1); the District will implement subsequent program phases in future years to restore and enhance the habitats on protected sites (Phase 2+).

**Level of stakeholder involvement and partnership:** Stakeholder involvement and intergovernmental partnerships are key to program success. The District has strong working relationships with local municipalities and counties. The District will work closely with these partners to ensure efficient program implementation and accomplishment of shared objectives. The District also has strong relationships with local community groups, particularly its lake

associations. The District will implement a targeted outreach campaign to engage with relevant stakeholders. See enclosed letters of support from local partners.

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

The project will permanently protect and subsequent phases will enhance a variety of wetland plant community types. These include hardwood swamp, shallow marsh, shrub swamp, riparian, shallow open water, wet meadow, and seasonally flooded basins. A DNR-mapped area of black-ash-yellow-birch-red maple-basswood swamp (WFn55b) is present at the inflow to Comfort Lake, and is a native plant community vulnerable to extirpation (S3). Multiple records of Blanding's turtles are present within the area and vicinity. The varied wetland habitats and adjacent sandy uplands (existing agricultural land) provide a large tract of habitat for this state-threatened species. A lake sturgeon record is also present at near the inlet to Comfort Lake, likely due to connectivity with the Sunrise River which flows through the corridor (DNR Fisheries Survey Report, 2005).

Once the parcels are acquired, the District will begin work to restore and enhance plant communities within the corridor. This work will include a thorough ecological assessment and inventory of the property followed by the preparation of targeted and rigorous restoration and management plan. The District will then execute the management plan with an overarching goal of restoring high quality and diverse native species dominated plant communities. This work will maximize the potential for biodiversity within the site and provided greater opportunity to support SGCN. Proposed work would maintain, enhance, or restore habitat for up to 24 SGCN.

The Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District will own and manage all easements and fee title acquisitions. The District will obtain an appraisal for all easements and acquisitions.

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

It is critical to protect undeveloped natural spaces while they still exist. It is particularly urgent to protect, and ultimately enhance/restore, wetland systems which improve landscape resiliency to climate change. The City of Forest Lake and Interstate 35 corridor are expected to expand in terms of population and impervious surface development between now and 2040.

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

This corridor is identified in the DNR Wildlife Action Network. The northern portion is mapped as a climate resilient and connected landscape by The Nature Conservancy indicating that it is important habitat corridor, valuable under future climate change scenarios. Enhancement of the southern portion would improve quality of this corridor and increase connectivity.

According to the MnDNR's 2013 Fish Habitat Plan, the CLFLWD has a moderate level of watershed disturbance (25-60% disturbed). The Fish Habitat Plan indicates that "lakes with watersheds that have moderate levels of disturbance (25-60%) have a more realistic chance for full restoration of water quality." The proposed project will result in 300 acres of land perpetually protected, which amounts to 5% of the 6,352-acre Comfort Lake watershed. This proposal is the first in a multi-phase initiative to expand habitat corridors and protect critical open spaces in this watershed.

This work aligns with multiple priorities for the Lower St. Croix (LSC) River One Watershed One Plan. The LSC Watershed Partnership's 10-year Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan (CWMP) indicates priority

locations are resources considered to be regionally significant, or types of resources or areas where work is needed most in order to realize change and “move the needle” toward improved or protected water resources. This proposal aligns with the following LSC CWMP priority protection areas: the Sunrise River Watershed (due to its size and land use, it is identified as the highest contributor of total phosphorus in Lake St. Croix (Chisago County, MPCA, USACE, 2013)), lands where critical habitat needs protection, groundwater sensitivity, and areas suitable for wetland restoration or creation. This proposal directly supports several goals from the LSC CWMP including: 1B. Protect and restore high quality native plant communities that support Species of Greatest Conservation Need; 1C. Identify, protect, and restore upland habitat that is degraded to expand corridors, connect critical habitat areas and promote resiliency; 1D. Manage climate adaptation through protection and creation of a resilient and diverse landscape. This proposal directly supports activity #40 in the LSC CWMP Implementation Table: measurable output of at least 1,000 acres protected through acquisition/easements.

**Which top 2 Conservation Plans referenced in MS97A.056, subd. 3a are most applicable to this project?**

Other : Lower St. Croix 1W1P 2021-2030 Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan and Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District 2022-2031 Watershed Management Plan

**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.**

Minnesota’s changing climate and increasing spring precipitation levels create an increased need for landscape resiliency. By protecting undeveloped spaces, particularly wetlands which detain, retain, and purify stormwater runoff, this proposal will increase landscape resiliency. Prior to July 2026 the Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District will complete a Flood Resiliency Action Plan and a Shoreline Resiliency Action Plan. These targeted plans will supplement the District’s Greenbelt and Open Space initiative by providing key climate resiliency priorities and strategies. The District is currently engaged in these planning efforts in order to lay the foundation and be fully prepared to target efforts and show climate resiliency results.

**Which LSOHC section priorities are addressed in this proposal?**

**Metro / Urban**

Protect habitat corridors, with emphasis on the Minnesota, Mississippi, and St. Croix rivers (bluff to floodplain)

**Northern Forest**

Provide access to manage habitat on landlocked public properties or protect forest land from parcelization and fragmentation through fee acquisition, conservation or access easement

**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 project will permanently protect and subsequent phases will enhance a variety of wetland plant community types. These include hardwood swamp, shallow marsh, shrub swamp, riparian, shallow open water, wet meadow, and seasonally flooded basins. A DNR-mapped area of black-ash-yellow-birch-red maple-basswood swamp (WFn55b) is present at the inflow to Comfort Lake, and is a native plant community vulnerable to extirpation (S3). Multiple records of Blanding’s turtles are present within the area and vicinity. The varied wetland habitats and adjacent sandy uplands (existing agricultural land) provide a large tract of habitat for this state-threatened species.

A lake sturgeon record is also present at near the inlet to Comfort Lake, likely due to connectivity with the Sunrise River which flows through the corridor (DNR Fisheries Survey Report, 2005).

## Outcomes

### Programs in metropolitan urbanizing region:

A network of natural land and riparian habitats will connect corridors for wildlife and species in greatest conservation need ~ *Number of acres put into perpetual public ownership, number of acres put into perpetual conservation easement, total number of acres open for public use.*

### Programs in the northern forest region:

Improved availability and improved condition of habitats that have experienced substantial decline ~ *Number of acres put into perpetual public ownership, number of acres put into perpetual conservation easement, total number of acres open for public use.*

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

Clean Water Fund

### 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.

This request does not supplant or substitute for any other funding.

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

The District has a staff of 10 full-time employees. It will utilize its staff and tax levy authority to ensure all acquired properties and easements are maintained in perpetuity. The District will create a Restoration and Management Plan for all lands acquired. The District will erect signage according to Laws 2009, chapter 172, article 5, section 10.

### Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2030	CLFLWD Levy	Create Restoration & Management Plans for each site	Implement Restoration & Management Plans for each site	Annually review progress

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

The Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District values equity, & inclusion, and is committed to accessibility, diversity, and fairness in all actions. We seek to use diversity, equity, and inclusion as a lens in project, partner, and contractor selection. As part of its Floodplain Vulnerability Assessment, the District worked with Zan Associates to conduct an equity analysis, and equity was a major factor in the decision-making process of the Floodplain Vulnerability Assessment. The District created a custom social vulnerability layer as part of its Floodplain Vulnerability Assessment in order to prioritize projects in areas with individuals below the poverty line, renter households, lone parents, young children, people aged 75 years and older, population density, individuals without a high school diploma, and persons for whom English is a second language. Acquired lands as part of this proposal will be open to all members of the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, and other outdoor recreational activities. The District will also implement access/information/educational signs in several languages so as to

encourage use of the property by underserved/underrepresented populations. Target languages, based on communities present in the Twin Cities area, include Spanish, Hmong, and Somali.

## Activity Details

### Requirements

**Will county board or other local government approval be formally sought\*\* prior to acquisition, per 97A.056 subd 13(j)?**

Yes

**Is the land you plan to acquire (fee title) free of any other permanent protection?**

Yes

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

Yes

### Land Use

**Will there be planting of any crop on OHF land purchased or restored in this program, either by the proposer or the end owner of the property, outside of the initial restoration of the land?**

No

**Will insecticides or fungicides (including neonicotinoid and fungicide treated seed) be used within any activities of this proposal either in the process of restoration or use as food plots?**

No

**Is this land currently open for hunting and fishing?**

No

**Will the land be open for hunting and fishing after completion?**

Yes

**Describe any variation from the State of Minnesota regulations:**

Hunting/fishing restrictions according to local municipal ordinances may apply. The District will coordinate closely with local municipalities in order to properly communicate hunting/fishing restrictions.

**Who will eventually own the fee title land?**

Local Unit of Government

**Land acquired in fee will be designated as a:**

Other : Nature Area

**Will the eased land be open for public use?**

Yes

**Describe the expected public use:**

To be determined on a site by site basis, as appropriate to surrounding land use and accessibility. The CLFLWD will own and manage all easements.

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

No

**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:**

This proposal constitutes the first phase of the Greenbelt and Open Space initiative. The District is currently requesting funding for easements and acquisitions only. The District will return to the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Fund with a "Phase 2" grant application in future years in order to fund restoration/enhancement work.

**Other OHF Appropriation Awards**

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

Yes

**Are any of these past appropriations still OPEN?**

Yes

Approp Year	Funding Amount Received	Amount Spent to Date	Funding Remaining	% Spent to Date
2023	\$1,942,000	-	-	-
Totals	\$1,942,000	-	\$1,942,000	0.0%

**Timeline**

Activity Name	Estimated Completion Date
Targeted outreach to landowners in order of priority	June 30, 2028
Acquisitions and conservation easements completed	June 30, 2030

**Budget****Totals**

Item	Funding Request	Total Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Personnel	-	\$150,000	CLFLWD Tax Levy	\$150,000
Contracts	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	\$2,000,000	-	-	\$2,000,000
Easement Acquisition	\$1,000,000	-	-	\$1,000,000
Easement Stewardship	-	-	-	-
Travel	-	-	-	-
Professional Services	\$300,000	-	-	\$300,000
Direct Support Services	-	-	-	-
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	-	-	-	-
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$3,300,000</b>	<b>\$150,000</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>\$3,450,000</b>

**Personnel**

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Funding Request	Total Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
CLFLWD Staff (Outreach, Project Mgmt, Planning, Coordination)	0.24	4.0	-	\$150,000	CLFLWD Tax Levy	\$150,000

**Amount of Request:** \$3,300,000**Amount of Leverage:** \$150,000**Leverage as a percent of the Request:** 4.55%**DSS + Personnel:** -**As a % of the total request:** 0.0%**Easement Stewardship:** -**As a % of the Easement Acquisition:** -

Total Leverage (from above)	Amount Confirmed	% of Total Leverage	Amount Anticipated	% of Total Leverage
\$150,000	\$150,000	100.0%	-	0.0%

**Detail leverage sources and confirmation of funds:**

All CLFLWD staff time will be funded by local CLFLWD tax levy.

**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?**

If the project received 50% of the requested funding we would reduce proposed acres proportionally. The CLFLWD has prioritized parcel list and will focus grant funds on the top priority sites.

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

Not applicable

### **If the project received 30% of the requested funding**

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

If the project received 30% of the requested funding we would reduce proposed acres proportionally. The CLFLWD has prioritized parcel list and will focus grant funds on the top priority sites.

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

Not applicable

### **Professional Services**

**What is included in the Professional Services line?**

Appraisals

Design/Engineering

Surveys

Title Insurance and Legal Fees

### **Fee Acquisition**

**What is the anticipated number of fee title acquisition transactions?**

5-10

### **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	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	160	40	0	0	200
Protect in Easement	80	20	0	0	100
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>300</b>

**Restoration/Enhancement Acres of OHF Acquired Lands (Table 1a.1)**

	RESTORE		Total	ENHANCE		Total
	Lands acquired in this proposal	Lands acquired with previous OHF appropriations (<5yrs old)		Lands acquired in this proposal	Lands acquired with previous OHF appropriations (<5yrs old)	
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>

**Restoration/Enhancement Acres Breakdown of Existing Protected Lands (Table 1a.2)**

	RESTORE		ENHANCE	
	Lands acquired with OHF	Lands NOT acquired with OHF	Lands acquired with OHF	Lands NOT acquired with OHF
DNR Lands (WMA, State Forests, etc)	-	-	-	-
Non-DNR Lands (city, state, federal, etc.)	-	-	-	-
Easements	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>

**Total Requested Funding by Resource Type (Table 2)**

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat	Total Funding
Restore	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	\$1,760,000	\$440,000	-	-	\$2,200,000
Protect in Easement	\$880,000	\$220,000	-	-	\$1,100,000
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,640,000</b>	<b>\$660,000</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>\$3,300,000</b>

**Acres within each Ecological Section (Table 3)**

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Acres
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	200	200
Protect in Easement	100	0	0	0	0	100
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>300</b>

**Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section (Table 4)**

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Funding
Restore	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	\$2,200,000	\$2,200,000
Protect in Easement	\$1,100,000	-	-	-	-	\$1,100,000
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$1,100,000</b>	-	-	-	<b>\$2,200,000</b>	<b>\$3,300,000</b>

**Average Cost per Acre by Resource Type (Table 5)**

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat
Restore	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	\$11,000	\$11,000	-	-
Protect in Easement	\$11,000	\$11,000	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	-

**Average Cost per Acre by Ecological Section (Table 6)**

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest
Restore	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	\$11,000
Protect in Easement	\$11,000	-	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-

**Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles**

## Parcels

### Sign-up Criteria?

No

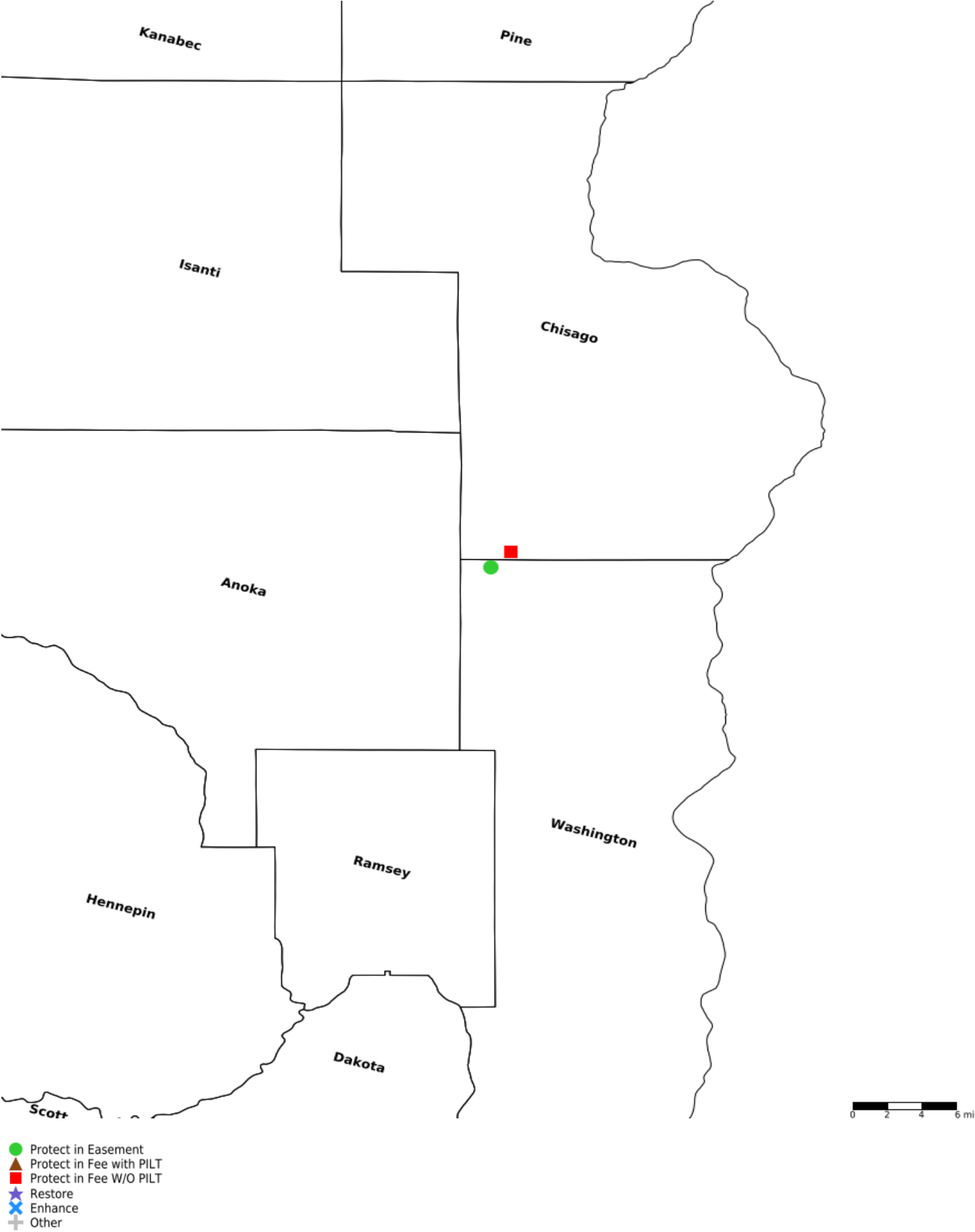
### Explain the process used to identify, prioritize, and select the parcels on your list:

The District utilizes a data-driven approach to prioritizing land protection efforts. Priority areas of the Watershed District are defined in the District's 2022-2031 Watershed Management Plan. These areas are defined based on the presence of MN Biological Survey Sites of Biodiversity Significance, native plant communities, wetlands, groundwater dependent natural resources, pollution sensitivity of near-surface materials, lake phosphorus sensitivity, and altered watercourses. The District has collected additional data to further refine priority parcels within these areas: floodplain vulnerability assessment and flood risk modeling, wetland inventory, and groundwater-dependent natural resources inventory. The District will use this data to directly reach out to priority landowners and solicit interest in easements and/or acquisitions.

### Protect Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection
Sunrise River (Chisago County) - TBD	Chisago	03321233	200	\$2,000,000	No
Sunrise River (Washington County) - TBD	Washington	03221205	100	\$1,000,000	No

Parcel Map



## Greenbelt Phase 1 Focus Area



Map of project focus area showing Sunrise River flowing northward from Forest Lake, through the Shallow Pond Wetland Complex, and into Comfort Lake. Easements and acquisitions will be focused along this high priority corridor.