

OHF-funded MOOSEH

By Javier Serna
Assistant Editor

The Minnesota Moose Collaborative, supported by several allocations of Outdoor Heritage Funding, is under consideration for a fourth phase of funding by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council.

It's a project that's attempting to help the state's struggling moose, the population of which has stabilized in recent years at a number far below previous highs. The project has accomplished much since the LSOHC first approved \$960,000 for the first phase in 2012.

It's also an excellent example of a collaborative, with a long list of public and private partners, from county governments to the U.S. Forest Service.

Originally led by the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, it is now being directed by the Ruffed Grouse Society, which was listed as one of the partner organizations in the third phase of project currently under way.

The collaborative has included, MDHA, RGS, The Nature Conservancy, the Wildlife Management Institute, the Minnesota DNR, Cook, Lake, and St. Louis counties, the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, the 1854 Treaty Authority, the University of Minnesota Duluth's Natural Resources Research Institute, and the Superior National Forest, where the bulk of work thus far has occurred.

While MDHA will remain one of the collaborators, the organization stepped away from the lead role because of the direction the DNR had taken – managing for lower deer numbers in some deer permit areas where moose are found in

northeastern Minnesota.

But the work – carrying out the "enhance" goals of the OHF (the others being restore, and protect wildlife habitat) – continues.

During first phase, with less than \$1 million to work with, the participants enhanced 2,049 acres of land. Project officials had hoped to impact 3,569 acres, but drought conditions prevented prescribed burns from being conducted. COVID-19 side-tracked prescribed burning this year.

The second phase was for \$2 million, and resulted in the enhancement of 7,349 acres of habitat.

The third phase included \$1.9 million and is being used to work on nearly 10,000 acres of

moose habitat.

The proposed fourth phase is seeking \$5.6 million to enhance 20,500 acres.

The work has taken place on county, tribal, state, and federal land in the state's moose range.



Prescribed fire is one tool that wildlife managers can use to put good moose habitat on the ground at a time when wildfires are often suppressed for human safety reasons.

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ABITAT

collaborative approaching

Phase 4

Moose need the right mix of conifers and deciduous trees.

Photos courtesy of Ruffed Grouse Society

"There's a very good process in looking for areas that are the best moose habitat," said Gary Drotts, a consultant for RGS, which took the opportunity to take the lead role in the project. Moose, grouse, and woodcock habitat needs are largely the same, so the habitat work has multiple benefits.

"It becomes excellent grouse and woodcock habitat for at least 10 years, maybe 20," Drotts said. "You get that younger forest type going on. This is the right thing to do because it is an important species in the north, and we get some good ruffed grouse and woodcock habitat out of it."

Brent Rudolph, RGS's chief conservation and legislative officer, said, "Ruffed grouse is in the

name of our organization, but we are also interested in healthy, diverse forests and actively managing those forests."

A number of tools and methods are used to improve moose habitat.

Prescribed fire

As mentioned, the coronavirus and subsequent burning restrictions in the state prevented one burn in particular from being conducted this spring. The conditions were otherwise right for a 4,700-acre burn near Daniels Lake – carrying out a U.S. Forest Service plan to burn remaining fuels from the 1999 blowdown event that leveled large swaths of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

(See **Moose Habitat** Page 33)

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MOOSE HABITAT —

(From Page 17)

“We have been trying to get some of these bigger (burns) done, including some in the wilderness,” said Dan Ryan, a wildlife biologist for Superior National Forest. “Some of those burns have shown some great moose response, but it’s a hard (burn to conduct), because so many variables come into doing them.”

The proposed Duncan Lake burn is also one of three prescribed burn study areas in the FdL Band’s annual Moose Habitat Survey Report, which is based on aerial surveys and seeks to see how moose are responding to wildfires, prescribed fire, and timber management. One moose was seen at the plot in this year’s survey, and, once that area does get burned, observers expect moose numbers will increase.

Ryan noted that the national forest budget is tight, so having the OHF money available to benefit moose will allow work to be done that might not otherwise get done.

Browse cutting

Ryan said browse cutting is necessary to accomplish wildlife habitat needs for moose. There are some brushy stands that need to be worked over, but they lack the amount of merchantable wood on them to entice loggers.

“What happens a lot – you will see a moose area, where they are keeping things mowed, but at some point it’s a little too tall for them to browse on it,” Ryan said. “By shearing, it starts over. It’s like hitting the reset button. Those are usually acres



This incredible set of moose sheds was found in one of the habitat work areas.

Photo courtesy of Ruffed Grouse Society

we don’t have money to do anything with. (OHF) has allowed (browse cutting), along with timber harvest, to expand the size of these young openings to the benefit of moose.”

In these cases, there just aren’t enough mature trees.

“We try to log first,” Ryan said.

Low-density conifer planting

While moose prefer deciduous trees such as aspen and birch to eat, they also rely on conifers, which often can’t compete with other trees and by deer browsing on their buds, which kills the trees.

“We do bud-capping, and (we) cut around the planted trees to give them room to grow above competing vegetation,” Ryan said, noting that larger conifer plantings are not beneficial to moose.

“What we’ve been doing is planting 200 to 400 trees per acre,” he said.

That creates pockets of conifers that moose use as thermal cover both during the heat

of the summer, when they’re trying to cool off, and in the winter, when those trees capture snow and make it easier for moose to move around in otherwise deeper snow.

All the work is seen as crucial, especially at a time when wildlife managers are limited in what can be done to help the iconic species.

Decreasing deer numbers in moose range – simply managing for fewer deer, which are not native to the moose range and bring with them brainworm (fatal to moose) – is not easily accomplished. Nor can much be done about high wolf numbers in the moose range. Wolves remain federally protected.

Working on habitat is one thing conservation partners can focus on.

“It’s just been a real good project,” Ryan said. “We have

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a lot of acres treated that we wouldn't have been able to get treated (without the funding

source). It has also benefited the relationships between the partners."

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August 20, 2020

Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
The State of Minnesota
State Office Building Room G95
100 Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Dear Members of the Council:

I am pleased to submit this letter on behalf of The Nature Conservancy in support of the Ruffed Grouse Society's FY22 Moose Habitat Collaborative Phase IV application. The Nature Conservancy is committed to full participation in the collaborative from planning through implementation and monitoring the results of our work.

This proposal will continue to provide high quality cover and foraging habitat for moose and will benefit many wildlife species and other biodiversity across the moose range in Minnesota. The Nature Conservancy feels that this phase IV proposal is both timely and necessary to build upon the substantial work accomplished in phases I-III to help ensure the future of an iconic species in Minnesota.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jim Manolis".

Jim Manolis
Forest Conservation Program Director
The Nature Conservancy – MN/ND/SD Chapter



Nate Eide
Land Commissioner
Forestry/Land Dept.

Mailing Address
Lake County Courthouse
601 3rd Ave
Two Harbors, MN 55616

Office Phone: 218-834-8340
Email: nate.eide@co.lake.mn.us

August 21, 2020

Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
The State of Minnesota
State Office Building Room G95
100 Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
Saint Paul, MN 55155

RE: FY22 Moose Habitat Collaborative Phase IV Application

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Council,

I am pleased to submit this letter on behalf of Lake County in support of the FY22 Moose Habitat Collaborative Phase IV Application. Lake County is committed to full participation in the collaborative from planning through implementation and monitoring the results of our work.

Lake County is currently involved in an "All Lands" approach with the US Forest Service along with several of our partners in which we address issues across the landscape. This moose habitat collaborative is one such effort and is a great continued step to ensure our success. It is especially important in northern Minnesota where there is a patchwork of federal, state, county and tribal ownership. This unified approach will help "dissolve" agency boundaries to ensure effective management of the land.

This Phase IV proposal will continue to provide high quality cover and foraging habitat for moose and numerous other species in northeast Minnesota. Specifically for Lake County, these funds have allowed us to treat low merchantable stands to create a healthier forest along with much more suitable moose habitat.

Implementing this project will also provide substantial benefits to other game and non-game species, our forest health and diversity, and the economy of our northern Minnesota communities. Lake County feels this Phase IV grant is both timely and necessary to continue the progress to ensure the future of an iconic species in Minnesota.

Sincerely,

Nate Eide
Land Commissioner





United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Superior National Forest
Supervisor's Office

8901 Grand Avenue Place
Duluth, MN 55808
218-626-4300

File Code: 2600
Date: August 19, 2020

Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
The State of Minnesota
State Office Building Room G95
100 Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen of the Council:

I am pleased to submit this letter on behalf of the Superior National Forest in support of the FY22 Moose Habitat Collaborative Phase IV Application. The Superior National Forest is committed to full participation in the collaborative from planning through implementation and monitoring the results of our work.

The Superior National Forest is currently implementing an "All Lands" approach with several of our partners in which we address issues across the landscape. This moose habitat collaborative is one such effort and is a great continued step to ensure our success. It is especially important in northern Minnesota where there is a patchwork of federal, state, county and tribal ownership. This unified approach will help "dissolve" agency boundaries to ensure effective management of the land.

This Phase IV proposal will continue to provide high quality cover and foraging habitat for moose and numerous other species in northeast Minnesota. The Phase I-III grants allowed us to help contribute to the over 19,000 acres of treatment on the ground that was accomplished. Specifically, for the Forest Service it has allowed us to enhance total treated acres in conjunction with our timber harvest program by allowing treatment of acres that would not have otherwise been treated due to low merchantability and other land use constraints. Focus was in areas of higher moose density based on local knowledge and the annual aerial moose survey. It will also allow us, in conjunction with other funding, the opportunity to conduct some landscape scale prescribed burns within and outside the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness which can provide some of the best quality moose habitat.

Implementing this project will also provide substantial benefits to other game and non-game species, our forest health and diversity, and the economy of our northern Minnesota communities. The Superior National Forest feels that this Phase IV grant is both timely and necessary to continue the progress to ensure the future of an iconic species in Minnesota.



If you have any questions regarding this letter of support please contact our Forest Natural Resources Staff Officer, James McFarland, at (218) 626-4317 or james.mcfarland@usda.gov.

Sincerely,



X *Constance Cummins*

Signed by: BRIAN VOSBERG
CONSTANCE CUMMINS
Forest Supervisor

cc: James McFarland, Dan Ryan, Luke Langstaff, Brent Rudolph