

Memo

Date: 12/29/2020

To: Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

From: Judy Schulte, Prairie Biologist

RE: Extension Request, ML18 Accelerated Native Prairie Bank Protection-Phase VII (Subd. 2f)

Summary of Request:

- **Current Appropriation Language:** The ML18 Accelerated Native Prairie Bank Protection-Phase VI (Subd. 2f) appropriation language currently allows for the acquisition of real property *until June 30, 2022, if a binding agreement with a landowner or purchase agreement is entered into by June 30, 2021, and closed no later than June 30, 2022. Appropriations for restoration or enhancement are available until June 30, 2023, or five years after acquisition, whichever is later, so that initial restoration or enhancement work can be completed.*
- **Reasons for Request:**
 - Stipulations and safety concerns around COVID-19 essentially increased the time necessary to acquire land and decreased the efficiency of the acquisition process. The acquisition process has been incredibly nimble throughout this last year and continues to navigate through every obstacle moving projects forward, however creating new ways to do just about everything takes time.
 - Landowner communication and in-person meetings are the most important part of the acquisition process. Staff go the extra mile to ensure landowners know what they are signing up for and want to a solid understanding at all times. This summer staff were able to shift to outdoor landowner meetings, however as cold temperatures hit this is becoming more and more difficult. Many landowners are not zoom or skype users, leaving phone to be the main source of communication which does not work well to guarantee a solid mutual understanding of easement terms, boundaries, management plans, etc.
 - Some landowners have been significantly impacted by COVID themselves.
 - Currently, this appropriation is on-track to option enough parcels to meet acre deliverables by June 30, 2021 but due to delays on additional parcels, there are limited “back-ups” if any of these parcels end up not continuing through the acquisition process or hit a significant delay. Unforeseen significant setbacks happen fairly often in the acquisition process, delays such as illness (or even death), divorce, legal access issues, title issues, etc.
- **Requested Change:** The MN DNR would like to request a 1-year extension for the ML18 Accelerated Native Prairie Bank Protection-Phase VII appropriation. This request, if approved, would allow for the acquisition of real property *until June 30, 2023, if a binding agreement with a landowner or purchase agreement is entered into by June 30, 2022, and closed no later than June 30, 2023.* Native Prairie Bank is prepared to shorten the initial restoration or enhancement work to be completed four years after acquisition (instead of five) in an effort to close the appropriation at the original anticipated end date.

Below is a table summarizing the Current vs. Proposed Appropriation Timelines.

Accomplishment Plan Activity	Current Estimated Completion Date	Proposed Estimated Completion Date
Enroll 380 acres of Native Prairie Bank Easements	June 30, 2021 (June 30, 2022 with binding agreement prior to June 30, 2021)	June 30, <u>2022</u> (June 30, <u>2023</u> with binding agreement prior to June 30, <u>2022</u>)
Restore approximately 25 acres of prairie (inclusion cropped acres acquired with these funds)	June 30, 2023 (or 5 years after acquisition)	June 30, 2023 (or 4 years after acquisition)

Project Background

The ML18 Accelerated Native Prairie Bank Protection-Phase VII (Subd. 2f) appropriation has a goal to protect 380 acres of native prairie and supporting habitat through perpetual Native Prairie Bank conservation easements. Easement acquisition is focused on Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan-identified landscapes, and targets what the Minnesota Biological Survey (MBS) identifies as threatened and endangered plant and animal species, high quality plant communities, and key habitats for Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and other wildlife species. Since its inception in 1987, Native Prairie Bank has been MN’s leading conservation easement for the protection of high quality native prairie. It is the only conservation easement authorized through statute aimed at the protection of native prairie.