



November 29, 2023

Mr. Mark Johnson
Executive Director
Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
State Office Building, Room 95
St. Paul, MN 55155

Re: Acquiring Land with Minnesota Land Trust Easement

Dear Mr. Johnson,

The Nature Conservancy has the opportunity to acquire approximately 162 acres in Houston County. The property will be transferred to the MN DNR as an addition to the Vinegar Ridge unit of the RJ Dorer Memorial Hardwood State Forest (Dorer State Forest). The property is adjacent to existing state land and connects two disjunct parcels, one of which is currently inaccessible without crossing private property. The project is funded through The Nature Conservancy's Southeast Minnesota Protection and Restoration Phase 10, Legislative Citation: M.L. 2022, Regular Session, Chapter 77, Article 1, Section 2, Subdivision 5(d); and Southeast Minnesota Protection and Restoration Phase 11, Legislative Citation: M.L. 2023, Regular Session, Chapter 40, Article 1, Section 2, Subdivision 5(e).

The Vinegar Ridge unit of the Dorer State Forest is a high-priority area for biodiversity in Southeast Minnesota. The area includes a 1,200+ acre complex of habitat with Outstanding Biodiversity Significance classified by the Minnesota Biological Survey. The Wildlife Action Plan and Root River Landscape Stewardship Plan both identify the area as an important priority, and it is part of a high-flow corridor of resilient land with recognized biodiversity in The Nature Conservancy's Resilient and Connected Network. Because of its high conservation value, the area has been a site where multiple DNR Divisions, The Nature Conservancy, and Minnesota Land Trust have all been active in coordinated habitat protection and management.

The property TNC is proposing to acquire is an example of both the high-quality habitat and the coordinated conservation occurring in the area. The property contains 56 acres of Outstanding Biodiversity Significance, and two known occurrences of Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCNs). DNR staff from both the Division of Forestry and the Nongame Wildlife Program have worked with the longtime landowner to include his property in burn units that straddle the property line with the State Forest unit and have helped him restore cropland to prairie with local ecotype seeds.

The Nature Conservancy
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Minneapolis, MN 55415

Minnesota Land Trust has also worked with the landowner and acquired a conservation easement on the property in 2014. That conservation easement is the issue we are bringing to your attention for discussion. MLT acquired the easement using funds from the Root River Protection and Restoration Program, Legislative Citation: ML2013, Regular Session, Chapter 137, Article 1, Section 2, Subdivision 5(c). The easement covers all but approximately 4 acres of the property.

The Lands in Public Domain statute requires that the purchase creates additional direct benefit to protect, restore, or enhance the state's wetlands, prairies, forests, or habitat for fish, game, and wildlife. The conservation easement currently in place provides important protection to the natural communities on this property from recreational, residential, or agricultural development. Acquiring the full fee title would add important benefits for both biodiversity and public access. The current conservation easement does not guarantee the active management necessary to maintain the high-quality prairie habitat on the property which support multiple SGCNs. Acquiring the full property rights will secure the ability to carry out those management activities. Additionally, it provides public access to this property and the landlocked state forest parcel adjacent to it for use and management. This will directly add 162 acres of available public hunting land and make an additional 30 acres accessible.

Section 97A.056, Subd. 9., of the Minnesota Statutes states as follows:

“Lands in public domain. Money appropriated from the outdoor heritage fund shall not be used to purchase any land in fee title or a permanent conservation easement if the land in question is fully or partially owned by the State of Minnesota or a political subdivision of the state, unless: (1) the purchase creates additional direct benefit to protect, restore, or enhance the state's wetlands, prairies, forests, or habitat for fish, game, and wildlife; and (2) the purchase is approved by an affirmative vote of at least nine members of the council.” The Nature Conservancy is seeking the approval of at least 9 members of the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council to proceed with the protection of this unique conservation tract.

If you require further information, please don't hesitate to contact me,

Sincerely,

David Ruff
Conservation Program Manager
The Nature Conservancy

Enclosure: Map of Proposed Acquisition

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1101 West River Parkway, Suite 200
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