

L-SOHC Questionnaire

Program Request Title: #8 Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR Land Acquisition

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A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:

1. Why there is an urgent need to act NOW?

The Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge was established to preserve, restore, and manage a portion of the remaining critical northern tallgrass prairie habitat and associated habitats at widespread locations throughout the western Minnesota and northwestern Iowa historic range. Only 5 percent of the original tallgrass prairie remains for preservation consideration throughout the entire historic tallgrass prairie range. Native prairie declines of 99.9% and 99.6% have occurred in Iowa and Minnesota, respectively. Grassland dependent bird species have shown steeper, more consistent, and geographically more widespread declines than any other group of North American birds.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has been limited on the number of acres purchased annually due to funding limitations since the establishment of this refuge. Our current land acquisition budget cannot keep up with the landowner interest in this program. This funding will allow us to better meet refuge goals and objectives to protect this vanishing habitat.

B. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

- 1. Tell the Council how much of your proposal is acquisition and how much restoration/enhancement?** The entire request of \$3.5M will be spent on land acquisition. The lands will be either purchased through fee title acquisition or permanently protected through perpetual habitat easements. All lands and easements purchased will become part of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge. Long term costs for restoration, management, and wildlife and habitat monitoring will be funded through annual Service operations funding. Service habitat easements are perpetual and managers will work with landowners to maintain and, where needed, restore the native prairie and associated grasslands and wetlands on each tract of land.
- 2. How will the public be able to use the all the projects in this program and enjoy the benefits of this public investment?** Lands purchased in fee title will be open to hunting, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation. Lands protected with habitat easements will stay in private ownership and therefore will not be open for public access unless authorized by the landowner.

C. PRIORITIES

- 1. Specifically, how does your program address the Council's statewide and/or regional priorities?** This proposal focuses on the acquisition of approximately 1,200-2,300 acres of native prairie and associated grasslands and wetlands in the prairie region of Minnesota. Along with the primary purpose of protecting and restoring native prairies, refuge land acquisition will also be used to link existing prairie tracts together (Federal, state, tribal, private organization, and private landowner ownerships) into larger

blocks to buffer remnant prairie tracts. This will establish larger, more viable units of managed prairie and allow travel corridors for wildlife. Prairie restoration used to link existing prairies together would utilize the same techniques used in managing existing prairies. These activities are priorities for the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council.

Prairie wetland and grassland habitats permanently protected through this grant will benefit species such as mallards, canvasbacks, upland sandpipers, short-eared owls, pheasants, western prairie fringed orchid, bobolinks, prairie chicken, and American bitterns. Many of these species are listed in various National, Regional, or State-level plans including the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Partners in Flight Physiographic Area Plan for the Tallgrass Prairie, State Pheasant Plan, and the Minnesota Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan.

2. **Tell the Council how do you set priorities among the opportunities available to this program? Be SPECIFIC.** Service field staff will work with local landowners and partners to review potential properties. These potential properties will be evaluated and weighted using the factors found on the **Evaluation Factors Matrix** from the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR Interim Comprehensive Conservation Plan. The evaluation factors were developed to help determine if and how a particular site meets the project goals that advance Service trustee responsibilities. The Northern Tallgrass Prairie Habitat Preservation Area project goals are Site Quality; Management and Restoration Suitability; Community Type Distribution; and Public Use, Recreation and Education.

Field personnel will also use landscape level planning tools produced by our Habitat and Population Evaluation Team (HAPET) staff in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, to review properties offered for sale and compare these lands to evaluation criteria established for the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Habitat Protection Area (HPA).

If the site quality of the proposed tracts meets our evaluation criteria, the land is recommended for purchase from Service field staff to the Project Leader. The properties will then be ranked by the Project Leader and reviewed by Regional Office staff to verify they meet project criteria. Many properties are not recommended for purchase based on their geographic location, restoration potential, and/or proximity to other conservation lands.

3. **Tell the Council how you define “science-based strategic planning”** The Service has developed Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC), as our science-based strategic planning tool. SHC involves: 1) biological planning to establish population goals and habitat objectives, 2) conservation delivery where Service/partners conserve and restore specific habitats for specific species, and, 3) evaluation of implementation strategies to determine if these strategies are achieving intended results. Service HAPET staff in Fergus Falls, Minnesota has as its primary function to do biological planning for the tallgrass prairie regions of Minnesota and north-central Iowa.

D. PROGRAM DETAILS:

1. The Work

- a. **Enumerate the specific kinds of action you plan to take to protect, enhance, and/or restore natural systems.** Once the potential properties are reviewed, evaluated and ranked as explained above in C.2, the proposed fee title and habitat easement additions will be given to Service Realty staff who will follow-up with

each willing seller to make sure they are interested in receiving an offer. If the private landowner remains interested, the Service will follow Realty procedures for an appraisal, appraisal review and follow appropriate acquisition procedures to make an offer to the private landowner. If the offer is accepted by the private landowner, the Service will arrange a time/date for closing. At the closing, the landowner will be paid and the land or easement interest will be transferred to the Service as a new unit of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR and part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Appropriate notice of grant restrictions will be recorded at the time of closing. Once in federal ownership, the Service will begin the necessary restoration needed on the subject property. Wetlands will be restored by either tile breaks, ditch plugs, and/or the placement of water control structures on the outlets of converted basins. Grasslands will be restored using local ecotype prairie seed by either mechanically planting or hand spreading on suitable substrates. Some follow-up interseeding and/or weed control may be required. Most, if not all restoration work, will be completed approximately 3 years following fee acquisition.

- b. What species will be helped?** Grassland species that will benefit from this project include, but are not limited to: upland sandpiper, Henslow's sparrow, short-eared owl, pheasant, bobolink, prairie chicken, and the grasshopper sparrow. Wetland species that will benefit from this project include, but are not limited to: canvasbacks, mallards, blue-winged teal, American bittern, black terns, trumpeter swans, common egret, and sora rails. This project will also help numerous species of mammals, insects, reptiles and amphibians by protecting native grasslands.
- c. Do you currently have the capacity to get the work done that you are requesting dollars for in FY 2011? -- Explain** Yes. The Service can accomplish the land acquisition goals with current Realty staff. Once acquired, lands will become units of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR and managed by existing Service field staff on Wetland Management Districts or National Wildlife Refuges.

2. Program Work Location

- a. What percent of your work will be prairie?** 100%. The entire project will protect prairie tracts and their associated grasslands and wetlands.
- b. What percent of your work will be wetland?**
- c. What percent of your work will be forest?**
- d. What percent of your work will be aquatic systems?**
- e. Is it part of a larger habitat complex? If yes BRIEFLY describe the complex.** Yes. Along with the primary purpose of protecting and restoring native prairies, Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR land acquisition is also be used to link existing prairie tracts together (Federal, state, tribal, private organization, and private landowner ownerships) into larger blocks plus buffer remnant prairie. This will establish larger, more viable units of managed prairie and allow travel corridors for wildlife. Prairie restoration used to link existing prairies together would utilize the same techniques used in managing existing prairies.

3. How We Plan to Use the Funds Requested

- a. What percent reduction could you accept without rendering your project inoperable?** The Service will work with whatever amount the Council considers appropriate to continue working towards our goal of permanently protecting prairie grasslands in western Minnesota.
- b. Have you also applied to the Outdoor Heritage Fund Conservation Partners Grant Program operated by DNR?** No, the Service has not applied for other Outdoor Heritage Funds as part of this project.
- c. Where else might you get money for this project?** Since 2000, the Service has received annual appropriations of approximately \$500,000 in Land and Water Conservation Funds to acquire lands for the Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR. This annual funding has allowed the Service to purchase smaller sized tracts of prairie during the last 9 years. The addition of Outdoor Heritage Funds will greatly increase our ability to protect larger tracts of native prairie throughout the 48 Minnesota Counties in the HPA.

4. Personnel Details

- a. Describe the personnel duties. Are they office staff or field staff – existing or new positions?** No new positions are part of this project. Existing Service field, Realty, and Regional Office staff will conduct the work needed to complete this project.