

L-SOHC Questionnaire

Program Request Title: 30 Accelerated Forest Wildlife Habitat Program

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A. REQUEST FOR FUNDING OVERVIEW:

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

Without active management, the capacity of forest stands to provide wildlife habitat and other ecological services is diminished. The on-going enhancement activities proposed in our program are much more effective and less expensive than restoring or rebuilding degraded ecological communities. Land markets are currently depressed or stabilized, and speculative development pressures have temporarily eased. This will provide a short-term opportunity to extend the state's acquisition buying power. In the long-term, steadily rising land costs, increasing urban development from population expansion, and conversion of existing native habitats to other land uses such as agriculture make protection and restoration of remaining native habitats urgent.

B. CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

1. Tell the Council how much of your proposal is acquisition and how much restoration/enhancement?

Of funds requested, 59% are proposed for acquisition of forestland. The remainder is for restoring and enhancing forest habitats.

2. How will the public be able to use the all the projects in this program and enjoy the benefits of this public investment?

The people of Minnesota are able to use the benefits of this program in a number of ways: more public lands for hunting, fishing, hiking, bird watching, nature photography, etc.; enhanced forest habitat and wildlife populations for consumptive, non-consumptive, and aesthetic benefits; and an investment in these resources and benefits for future generations of Minnesotans.

C. PRIORITIES

1. Specifically, how does your program address the Council's statewide and/or regional priorities?

The many projects that make up the Forest Wildlife Habitat Program directly address the regional and statewide forest priorities of the Council. The forestland acquisition component of our program directly protects land from parcelization and fragmentation. Each tract of land on our list for possible acquisition contributes to the state resource protection base in a significant way. Individual tracts protect: habitat complexes, corridors, rare landscape features (such as bluffs), locations of unique ecological significance (such as rare native plant communities), and consolidate existing state land for better public access and management and protect additional moose habitat in the Aspen Parklands landscape.

The forestland restoration and enhancement component of our program is comprised of projects on state lands (WMAs, SNAs and State Forests), many of which encompass MCBS high and outstanding biological diversity sites, critical wildlife habitat, and "at-risk" land features (such as bluffs and riparian areas). Our project list was built around our

program priorities of protecting and enhancing native forest communities (targeting rare and uncommon communities) and land features, as well as benefiting specific species (examples: moose, woodcock, grouse). These activities are not conducted as part of the Department's commercial timber operations, and are in addition to what is already being undertaken.

Our program is on-going; the magnitude of our accomplishments is determined by the level of funding. Benefits of this work include protection of additional forestland, better management across more acres of forest, enhanced habitat for game and non-game wildlife species, additional opportunities for outdoor recreation, and an investment in securing these benefits for future generations of Minnesota's citizens. Due to the current recession, land prices have stabilized or declined and a short-term opportunity exists to purchase more value for our expenditure.

The management objectives in this program parallel the forest management options outlined in *Minnesota's State Wildlife Action Plan, Tomorrow's Habitat for the Wild and Rare (Tomorrow's Habitat Plan)*. Implementation of these objectives in key habitats identified in the *Plan* will maintain and enhance native forest communities supporting game and non-game wildlife populations. *Tomorrow's Habitat Plan* also calls for the purchase and protection of key habitats as another tool to address the conservation needs. Almost one-third of the state's 292 Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) inhabit forests.

2. Tell the Council how do you set priorities among the opportunities available to this program? Be SPECIFIC

Priority will be given to acquisitions that accomplish the following: complete or significantly contribute to the protection of a habitat complex, protect forestland at risk, or conserves resources providing unique/valuable wildlife habitat or ecological significance. The acquisition component of this proposal is scalable; with less funding fewer acquisitions will be accomplished.

The program's restoration and enhancement component is scalable. Less funding will reduce the number of projects and/or number of acres treated at larger project sites. Priority will be given to the following types of projects: forest prescribed burns and other site prep treatments (such as hand release) that take the place of mechanical and chemical treatments; enhancement of habitat for moose, grouse and woodcock; control of invasive species; and increase the presence of under-represented plant species and native plant communities (such as oak, white pine, birch, cedar, etc.) where appropriate.

3. Tell the Council how you define "science-based strategic planning"

Our program is one of several that implements the DNR's Subsection Forest Resource Management Plans (SFRMPs). These are long-term (50 plus years) plans with short-term (10 years) vegetation management directions. The plans articulate the mix of ecological and social values and economic products that will be sustained through forest management. Implementation and effectiveness monitoring data feeds back into the annual and 10 year planning process. A small percentage of projects in our program are geographically outside the range of an SFRMP. In these instances, management is consistent with the sustainability principles evident in the SFRMPs.

Many of the project locations have been identified by the Minnesota County Biological Survey (MCBS) and evaluated on their native plant quality and biological significance

and recommended as high priorities for protection. The DNR does not use a single planning and evaluation model in our acquisition priority setting process but rather assesses each parcel individually and in context to other existing and proposed public land.

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.**

Restoration and enhancement activities on 27,060 ac of state forestland will include: prescribed burning; mowing or shearing of woody vegetation; planting, seeding or encouraging natural regeneration; selective cutting and thinning; seedling protection measures; herbicide treatments; and others. Approximately 2,219 ac of forestland will be permanently protected by fee title acquisition and permanent easements.

- b. **What species will be helped?**

Our program will benefit game, non-game, and Species of Greatest Conservation Need (almost one-third of the state's 292 Species in Greatest Conservation Need inhabit forests). Our program will enhance oak and create a mix of young hardwood forest with more open meadow/brushlands to benefit ruffed grouse, elk, wild turkey, and deer. Enhancement of conifer stands and mixed hardwood/conifer forests will provide habitat for fisher, marten, and spruce grouse, and thermal cover for deer and moose. Forest opening recreation/enhancement will increase nut and berry production, provide roosting/display areas, and create feeding areas for moose, deer, woodcock, and bear. Shearing of trees and brush in large open landscape priority areas will benefit sharp-tailed grouse and golden-winged warblers. Shearing and mowing of hardwoods and brush in smaller patches will benefit woodcock and deer. Acquisition of a key Blufflands-Mississippi River site will protect a significant part of a critical migratory corridor for forest songbirds, raptors, and waterfowl. Our program will benefit a number of nongame species, including red shouldered hawks, yellow rails, sandhill cranes, northern harriers, bobolinks, and upland sandpipers. The less intensive timber management in our program will help protect rare native plant communities and a number of nongame species through retention and enhancement of plant species diversity and structure.

- c. **Do you currently have the capacity to get the work done that you are requesting dollars for in FY 2011? -- Explain**

Yes, MN DNR has the organizational structure to carry out this proposal if funds are received. While most work will be done with vendor contracts, a limited number of positions are needed to accomplish the proposed work.

2. Program Work Location

- a. **What percent of your work will be prairie?** 0%
- b. **What percent of your work will be wetland?** 0%
- c. **What percent of your work will be forest?** 100%
- d. **What percent of your work will be aquatic systems?** 0%
- e. **Is it part of a larger habitat complex? If yes BRIEFLY describe the complex.**

Yes, many of the project sites (for management and acquisition) are part of habitat complexes that include forests, riparian areas, wetlands, openlands, etc. An

example of such a project is the forest patch management project that is part of the Manitou Collaborative.

3. How We Plan to Use the Funds Requested

a. **What percent reduction could you accept without rendering your project inoperable?**

The amount of work accomplished is proportional to the amount of funding received. Significant reductions may eliminate the acquisition portion of the project.

b. **Have you also applied to the Outdoor Heritage Fund Conservation Partners Grant Program operated by DNR?**

No.

c. **Where else might you get money for this project?**

Some funding may be available as federal grants to state wildlife agencies.

4. Personnel Details

a. **Describe the personnel duties. Are they office staff or field staff – existing or new positions?**

Division of Fish & Wildlife: A new unclassified and temporary position is needed to administer contracts, outline work projects, monitor activities, and assist in the field (two-thirds in the office and one-third in the field). A new quarter-time acquisition specialist is needed to guide fee purchases through the acquisition process (anticipate three-fourths in the office and one-fourth in the field; shared position).

A small percentage of the more specialized forest enhancement work will be done by a DNR roving labor crew (6 people with a crew leader, all new employees) with approximately 25% of the crew's time spent on forest enhancement activities. The remainder of this crew's time will be spent on other Outdoor Heritage funded programs with DNR (primarily grassland prescribed burning and other grassland management). The crew leader will spend some time (approximately one-third) in the office coordinating field work. Except for necessary training and other minor administrative tasks, the crew will be entirely field-based.

Some funds will be used to pay existing staff, which are trained for fire duty, to conduct forest prescribed burns. These hours are all in the field.

Scientific & Natural Area (SNA) Program: Requested funds for personnel in the SNA program are for a combination of classified and unclassified employees paid almost exclusively with special project funds (or "soft money"). It includes the following: contract and project management coordinator (new classified position starting in FY10) and portions of 2 current acquisition specialist positions (one classified and one unclassified) which would spend approximately three-fourths time in office and one-fourth in the field; and region-based crews and field staff (specialists, technicians, laborers, and seasonal burn crews) responsible for implementing projects. The specialists and technicians will spend one-fourth to one-half their time in the office planning and preparing for field projects. The remainder of their time will be in the field. Except for necessary training and other minor administrative tasks, the crews will be entirely field-based.