

# Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council Fiscal Year 2021 / ML 2020 Request for Funding

Date: May 30, 2019



**Program or Project Title:** Accelerating Habitat Conservation in Southwest Minnesota

**Funds Requested:** \$6,653,300

**Manager's Name:** Wayne Ostlie

**Title:** Director of Land Protection

**Organization:** Minnesota Land Trust

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**County Locations:** Jackson, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, and Nobles.

**Eco regions in which work will take place:**

- Prairie

**Activity types:**

- Protect in Easement
- Restore
- Enhance

**Priority resources addressed by activity:**

- Wetlands
- Forest
- Prairie
- Habitat

## Abstract:

The Minnesota Land Trust proposes to permanently protect 1,200 acres of high quality habitat in southwest Minnesota by securing conservation easements within scientifically prioritized habitat complexes by filling key unmet gaps in the available land protection toolbox. Working with willing landowners the Land Trust will use its innovative bid model to maximize conservation benefit and financial leverage in project selection. The Land Trust in cooperation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service will restore/enhance 800 acres of wetlands and associated prairies to benefit SGCN and waterfowl populations.

## Design and scope of work:

The plight of prairies and wetlands in southwest Minnesota is well-documented; less than 2% of native prairie remains and 90% of wetlands have been lost. Habitat loss and degradation threaten wildlife populations and contribute to the decline of the 116 SGCN that utilize the wetlands, streams and prairies across the region.

Since the inception of Minnesota's Prairie Plan in 2010, targeted land protection and restoration action by a large number of conservation organizations and agencies has resulted in significant conservation gains across southwest Minnesota. Now nearly a decade into its implementation, the Land Trust engaged a broad cross-section of these organizations to identify what challenges remain to realizing that Plan. Through this conversation, several significant challenges were identified: 1) land protection tools currently available are not sufficiently broad to address the full spectrum of need; high priority easement projects at times don't align with the conservation easement programs currently available; 2) restoration and enhancement funding available has been a limiting factor to some key partners, and 3) high priority areas for conservation (identified in Minnesota's Wildlife Action Network [WAN]) do not always align with the Prairie Plan and are not being addressed. This proposal aims to address these gaps in the Southwest Minnesota

conservation framework by marrying the Land Trust's unique set of tools and expertise with funding through the Outdoor Heritage Fund.

Working with willing landowners, the Land Trust will protect 1,100 acres of priority wetland, prairie and associated upland habitat through conservation easements. The Land Trust's conservation easements fill an important gap not addressed by easement programs currently available in Southwest Minnesota through USFWS, MN DNR and BWSR. The Land Trust's easement program has greater flexibility to address key conservation opportunities that otherwise would be left on the table. Land protection actions through this proposal will focus on: 1) priority areas within the Prairie Plan left orphaned by current conservation easement programs, and 2) conservation priorities identified in the WAN that are not encompassed by the Prairie Plan. The Land Trust will employ its criteria-based ranking system and market-based approach to the acquisition of conservation easements. This strategic approach targets projects that help fill gaps in existing public ownership, are of the highest ecological value, and provide the greatest leverage to the State's funding investment. The Land Trust will seek donated easements whenever possible but also may fully purchase easements that help complete key complexes as necessary.

Restoration and enhancement activities will target priority permanently protected lands. The Land Trust in cooperation with USFWS will restore and enhance 800 acres of important wetland, riparian and prairie habitat on permanently protected lands. These projects will increase buffers and provide links to existing protected wetland and upland habitat complexes across the program area.

This program will be closely coordinated with other public agencies (including MN DNR, BWSR, USFWS, and local SWCDs), and other non-profit organizations to ensure multi-agency conservation goals are being met.

## Which sections of the Minnesota Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan are applicable to this project:

- H1 Protect priority land habitats
- H5 Restore land, wetlands and wetland-associated watersheds

## Which other plans are addressed in this proposal:

- Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan
- Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025

## Describe how your program will advance the indicators identified in the plans selected:

Once secured, conservation easements will protect in perpetuity some of Minnesota's premier wetland and prairie habitat resources. Habitat management plans will be developed and provided to landowners for use in enhancing and maintaining each parcel's important habitat. Restoration and enhancement of prairie and wetland habitats on USFWS easement and fee lands will improve habitat quality that will benefit SGCN along with waterfowl, pheasants, and other wildlife. Protecting these critical habitats advances a primary goal identified by Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan through stabilization of SGCN, the state's waterfowl population through the Duck Plan, and the full slate of prairie species through the Prairie Plan.

## Which LSOHC section priorities are addressed in this proposal:

### Prairie:

- Protect, enhance, or restore existing wetland/upland complexes, or convert agricultural lands to new wetland/upland habitat complexes

## Describe how your program will produce and demonstrate a significant and permanent conservation legacy and/or outcomes for fish, game, and wildlife as indicated in the LSOHC priorities:

The Minnesota Land Trust will focus its protection, restoration and enhancement work on key wetland, prairie and other habitats within the Upper Minnesota River Valley, Prairie Coteau and other regions of Southwest Minnesota, guided by the Minnesota Prairie Plan, Duck Plan and State Wildlife Action plan. High quality lands are protected through acquisition of perpetual conservation easements; native habitats are restored and enhanced on existing easel lands. We work in partnership with local, state and federal agency and non-profit conservation partners to ensure our activities are complementary to those undertaken by others working in the program area. By doing this, we are building complexes of high quality protected habitat, reducing fragmentation, and providing for connectivity between core habitat areas that will enable species to move freely.

In obtaining conservation easements (whether by donation or through purchase), we work with willing, conservation-minded landowners. Our landowner bid process will be targeted toward specific areas within our Southwest Minnesota program area identified through the plans listed above. Opportunities within the program area are identified and prioritized based on the potential to contribute toward building a permanent conservation legacy that includes positive outcomes for wildlife and the public. Prairie and

wetland habitats on lands protected through conservation easement by the Land Trust or in fee/easement by USFWS (a cooperator in this program) are restored and enhanced by respective parties to elevate their inherent value to wildlife. Both the Land Trust and USFWS are deeply committed to maintaining these investments over time.

## Describe how the proposal uses science-based targeting that leverages or expands corridors and complexes, reduces fragmentation or protects areas identified in the MN County Biological Survey:

This program is focused on procuring conservation easements and restoring prairie and wetland habitats on easement and fee protected lands within priority complexes of wetlands and associated upland habitats, as guided by the State Wildlife Action Plan, Duck Plan and Prairie Plan. Specific parcels available for easement acquisition are evaluated relative to each other to identify priorities among the pool of applicants. This relative ranking is based on three primary ecological factors [1] amount of habitat on the parcel (size) and abundance of SGCN; 2) the quality or condition of habitat; and 3) the parcel's context relative to other natural habitats and protected areas] in addition to cost. The program serves to build upon past conservation investments in the program area, expand the footprint of existing protected areas (WMAs, WPAs, etc.), facilitate the protection of habitat corridors and reduce the potential for fragmentation of existing habitats. In addition, the USFWS (a cooperator in this program) will receive OHF funding through MLT to further reduce effects of fragmentation through restoration of prairie, wetlands and other habitats. Minnesota Biological Survey data is a cornerstone to our assessment of potential conservation easement acquisitions. We also conduct field visits to further identify and assess condition of habitats prior to easement acquisition because many private lands were not formally assessed through MBS.

## How does the proposal address habitats that have significant value for wildlife species of greatest conservation need, and/or threatened or endangered species, and list targeted species:

This program addresses LSOHC priorities by protecting shallow lakes, wetland/grassland complexes, and shoreland that provide critical habitat for Minnesota's wildlife, especially its migratory waterfowl and associated species. Minnesota's wetlands are essential to our wildlife health and diversity. This project directly benefits SGCN and other important game and non-game wildlife species by minimizing the potential threats to their habitat caused by detrimental agricultural practices, residential or commercial development or imprudent land management. The wetland habitat complexes that will be targeted through the ranking system will include a mosaic of wetlands, grasslands and woodlands. Priority projects will include high or outstanding habitat as identified in Minnesota Biological Survey data. Projects will also be located near other protected lands to help build larger habitat complexes comprised of both public and private lands. The vast majority of this landscape is in private ownership. For that reason, working with private owners on land protection strategies is key to successful conservation in this region. Finally, we will work closely with partners in the region to identify those habitat complexes where private land protection can make a significant contribution to existing conservation investments.

## Identify indicator species and associated quantities this habitat will typically support:

DNR staff, in consultation with a variety of experts in NGOs and other agencies, have compiled a list of indicator species and associated quantities to be used to answer the question above. The metrics are derived from existing data sources and/or scientific literature, but are necessarily gross averages; they are not accurate at a site-specific scale. Therefore, they are not intended to be used to score or rank requests, but represent the best information we have for immediate support of the Council's objective.

### 1. Prairies and Grasslands

Bobolink and Grasshopper Sparrow: The breeding territory size of bobolinks and grasshopper sparrows is 1.7 and 2.1 acres respectively in high quality habitat in Wisconsin. 100 acres of habitat could potentially hold approximately 60 and 48 pairs of bobolinks and grasshopper sparrows, respectively.

Ring-necked Pheasant: By looking at the ratios of CRP acres in Minnesota to pheasant harvest, we can estimate that every three acres of grassland habitat has the potential to produce one harvested pheasant rooster.

### 2. Wetlands and Shallow Lakes

Mallard: The biological model used in the UMRG LRJV uses a simple but accepted rate of 1 mallard pair per hectare (1 mallard pair per 2.47 acres) of wetland habitat (noting that upland nesting habitat is also needed).

Trumpeter swan: Though reported territories can range in size from 1.5 - >100 hectares, a reasonable expectation is that 1 trumpeter swan pair would be supported by each 150 acres of wetland protected, restored or enhanced.

## Outcomes:

### Programs in prairie region:

- Protected, restored, and enhanced habitat for migratory and unique Minnesota species *This program will permanently protect 1,100 acres of wetland and upland habitat complexes and restore/enhance 800 acres of wetlands and prairies in the prairie region. Measure: Acres protected; acres restored; acres enhanced.*

## How will you sustain and/or maintain this work after the Outdoor Heritage Funds are expended:

Land protected through conservation easements will be sustained through state-of-the-art standards and practices for conservation easement stewardship. The Minnesota Land Trust is a nationally-accredited land trust with a very successful stewardship program that includes annual property monitoring, effective records management, addressing inquiries and interpretations, tracking changes in ownership, investigating potential violations and defending the easement in cases of a true violation. Funding for these easement stewardship activities is included in the project budget.

In addition, MLT will assist landowners in the development of comprehensive habitat management plans to help ensure that the land will be managed for its wildlife and water quality benefits. MLT (as easement holder) and USFWS (as easement holder and fee owner of respective properties) will work with landowners in an ongoing basis to provide habitat restoration plans, resources and technical expertise to undertake restoration, enhancement and ongoing management of these properties.

## Explain the things you will do in the future to maintain project outcomes:

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2024 and in perpetuity	MLT Long -Term Stewardship and Enforcement Fund	Annual monitoring of easements in perpetuity	Enforcement as necessary	
Every 4-6 years	USFWS, Landowners	Prescribed fire, tree removal, Invasive species control		

## What is the degree of timing/opportunistic urgency and why it is necessary to spend public money for this work as soon as possible:

Although much conservation activity has taken place in this landscape for more than 10 years, we now have a unique opportunity to fill a conservation gap and increase landscape-level impacts to protect important wetland and grassland complexes. With an aging landowner population, organizational momentum, and strong local partnerships the time to fill this important conservation niche across the region is now. To focus our work, we have completed an initial analysis to identify important wetland/grassland complexes in this landscape based on the nexus of high-quality habitat, existing protected areas and restorable agricultural lands. These complexes include a mosaic of wetland, prairie/grassland, and forest habitats, as well as agricultural land.

## Does this program include leverage in funds:

Yes

Through its market-based RFP process, the Land Trust expects private landowners to donate at least \$440,000 in easement value toward the program, which is shown as leverage.

## Relationship to other funds:

- Not Listed

## Describe the relationship of the funds:

Not Listed

## Per MS 97A.056, Subd. 24, Any state agency or organization requesting a direct appropriation from the OHF must inform the LSOHC at the time of the request for funding is made, whether the request is supplanting or is a substitution for any previous funding that was not from a legacy fund and was used for the same purpose:

Funding procured by MLT from the Outdoor Heritage Fund through this proposal will not supplant or substitute any previous funding from a non-Legacy fund used for the same purpose.

## Describe the source and amount of non-OHF money spent for this work in the past:

Not Listed

## Activity Details

## Requirements:

If funded, this proposal will meet all applicable criteria set forth in MS 97A.056 - Yes

Is the land you plan to acquire (easement) free of any other permanent protection - Yes

Will restoration and enhancement work follow best management practices including MS 84.973 Pollinator Habitat Program - Yes

Is the restoration and enhancement activity on permanently protected land per 97A.056, subd 13(f), tribal lands, and/or public waters per MS 103G.005, Subd. 15 - Yes (WPA, Permanently Protected Conservation EasementsRefuge Lands)

Do you anticipate federal funds as a match for this program - No

## Land Use:

Will there be planting of corn or any crop on OHF land purchased or restored in this program - Yes

Explain

### Easement Acquisition:

The purpose of the Minnesota Land Trust's conservation easements is to protect and restore/enhance existing high quality natural habitat and to preserve opportunities for future restoration. We restrict agricultural lands and use on the properties. In cases where there are agricultural lands associated with the larger property, we will either exclude the agricultural area from the conservation easement, or in some limited cases, we may target agricultural lands for restoration purposes.

### Restoration/Enhancement:

Short-term use of agricultural crops is an accepted best practice for preparing a site for prairie restoration. For example, soybeans on a short-term basis could be used for restorations in order to control weed seedbeds prior to prairie planting. In some cases this necessitates the use of GMO-treated products to facilitate herbicide use in order to control weeds present in the seedbank.

Will the eased land be open for public use - No

Are there currently trails or roads on any of the acquisitions on the parcel list - Yes

Describe the types of trails or roads and the allowable uses:

Most conservation easements are established on private lands, many of which have driveways, field roads and trails located on them. Often, the conservation easement permits the continued usage of established trails and roads so long as their use does not significantly impact the conservation values of the property. Creation of new roads/trails or expansion of existing ones is typically not allowed.

Will the trails or roads remain and uses continue to be allowed after OHF acquisition - Yes

How will maintenance and monitoring be accomplished:

Existing trails and roads are identified in the project baseline report and will be monitored annually as part of the Land Trust's stewardship and enforcement protocols. Maintenance of permitted roads/trails in accordance with the terms of the easement will be the responsibility of the landowner.

Will new trails or roads be developed or improved as a result of the OHF acquisition - No

## Accomplishment Timeline

Activity	Approximate Date Completed
Conservation easements closed or options secured	June 30, 2023
Restoration and enhancement projects completed	June 30, 2025

# Budget Spreadsheet

**Total Amount of Request: \$6,653,300**

## Budget and Cash Leverage

Budget Name	LSOHC Request	Anticipated Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Personnel	\$356,500	\$0		\$356,500
Contracts	\$1,191,000	\$0		\$1,191,000
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	\$0	\$0		\$0
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	\$0	\$0		\$0
Easement Acquisition	\$4,400,000	\$440,000	Landowner donation of easement value	\$4,840,000
Easement Stewardship	\$192,000	\$0		\$192,000
Travel	\$35,000	\$0		\$35,000
Professional Services	\$157,500	\$0		\$157,500
Direct Support Services	\$96,300	\$0		\$96,300
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	\$0	\$0		\$0
Capital Equipment	\$0	\$0		\$0
Other Equipment/Tools	\$15,000	\$0		\$15,000
Supplies/Materials	\$210,000	\$0		\$210,000
DNR IDP	\$0	\$0		\$0
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$6,653,300</b>	<b>\$440,000</b>		<b>\$7,093,300</b>

## Personnel

Position	FTE	Over # of years	LSOHC Request	Anticipated Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
MLT Protection Staff	0.75	3.00	\$214,000	\$0		\$214,000
MLT Restoration Staff	0.50	3.00	\$142,500	\$0		\$142,500
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.25</b>	<b>6.00</b>	<b>\$356,500</b>	<b>\$0</b>		<b>\$356,500</b>

Amount of Request: \$6,653,300  
 Amount of Leverage: \$440,000  
 Leverage as a percent of the Request: 6.61%  
 DSS + Personnel: \$452,800  
 As a % of the total request: 6.81%  
 Easement Stewardship: \$192,000  
 As a % of the Easement Acquisition: 4.36%

## How did you determine which portions of the Direct Support Services of your shared support services is direct to this program:

In a process that was approved by the DNR on March 17, 2017, Minnesota Land Trust determined our direct support services rate to include all of the allowable direct and necessary expenditures that are not captured in other line items in the budget, which is similar to the Land Trust's proposed federal indirect rate. We will apply this DNR-approved rate only to personnel expenses to determine the total amount of direct support services.

## What is included in the contracts line?

Restoration and enhancement accounts for \$771,000 of the contract line amount. Additional funds in the contract line are for the writing of habitat management plans via qualified vendors and engaging respective County Soil and Water Conservation Districts for landowner outreach purposes to facilitate communication of the protection program.

## Does the amount in the travel line include equipment/vehicle rental? - Yes

## Explain the amount in the travel line outside of traditional travel costs of mileage, food, and lodging:

Land Trust staff regularly rent vehicles for grant-related purposes, which is a significant cost savings over use of personal vehicles.

## Describe and explain leverage source and confirmation of funds:

The Land Trust encourages landowners to fully or partially donate the value of conservation easements to the program. The leverage amount is a conservative estimate of value we expect to see donated by landowners. USFWS has committed cash and in-kind staff time toward restoration/enhancement projects.

**Does this proposal have the ability to be scalable? - Yes**

**Tell us how this project would be scaled and how administrative costs are affected, describe the "economy of scale" and how outputs would change with reduced funding, if applicable:**

Because this program endeavors to protect and restore/enhance multiple parcels, it is scalable. Less funding will result in fewer protected acres and lost opportunities in an area where landowner interest and opportunity is high. Some costs are fixed; economy of scale diminishes with reduction in appropriation amount.

**What is the cost per easement for stewardship and explain how that amount is calculated?**

The average cost per easement to fund the Minnesota Land Trust's perpetual monitoring and enforcement obligations is \$24,000. This figure is derived from MLT's detailed stewardship funding "cost analysis" which is consistent with Land Trust Accreditation standards. MLT shares periodic updates to this cost analysis with LSOHC staff.

## Output Tables

**Table 1a. Acres by Resource Type**

Type	Wetlands	Prairies	Forest	Habitats	Total
Restore	0	0	0	800	800
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	0	0	1,200	1,200
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0	2,000	2,000

**Table 2. Total Requested Funding by Resource Type**

Type	Wetlands	Prairies	Forest	Habitats	Total
Restore	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$1,507,000	\$1,507,000
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Easement	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$5,146,300	\$5,146,300
Enhance	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Total	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$6,653,300	\$6,653,300

**Table 3. Acres within each Ecological Section**

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	Northern Forest	Total
Restore	0	0	0	800	0	800
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	0	0	1,200	0	1,200
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0	2,000	0	2,000

**Table 4. Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section**

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	Northern Forest	Total
Restore	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$1,507,000	\$0	\$1,507,000
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Easement	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$5,146,300	\$0	\$5,146,300
Enhance	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Total	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$6,653,300	\$0	\$6,653,300

**Table 5. Average Cost per Acre by Resource Type**

Type	Wetlands	Prairies	Forest	Habitats
Restore	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$1,884
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Easement	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$4,289
Enhance	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0

**Table 6. Average Cost per Acre by Ecological Section**

Type	Metro /Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	Northern Forest
Restore	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$1,884	\$0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Fee W/O State PILT Liability	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Protect in Easement	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$4,289	\$0
Enhance	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0

*Automatic system calculation / not entered by managers*

**Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles**

0

I have read and understand Section 15 of the Constitution of the State of Minnesota, Minnesota Statute 97A.056, and the Call for Funding Request. I certify I am authorized to submit this proposal and to the best of my knowledge the information provided is true and accurate.

# Parcel List

## Explain the process used to select, rank and prioritize the parcels:

The Land Trust uses a competitive, market-based approach through an RFP process to identify interested landowners and prioritize parcels for conservation easement acquisition. All proposals submitted by landowners are evaluated and ranked relative to their ecological significance based on three primary factors: 1) size of habitat on the parcel; 2) condition of habitat on the parcel; and 3) the context (both in terms of amount/quality of remaining habitat and protected areas) within which the parcel lies. We also ask the landowner to consider contributing all or a portion of fair market value to enable our funds to make a larger conservation impact (see attached sign-up criteria). We contract with local SWCD offices to provide outreach services as a way to connect effectively with local landowners.

Restoration and enhancement work will take place on private lands over which MLT and USFWS have secured permanent conservation easements to protect wetlands and associated upland habitat. The projects included in the parcel list were identified as priorities for restoration/enhancement by USFWS staff in their Morris and Fergus Falls offices and MLT staff.

## Section 1 - Restore / Enhance Parcel List

### Jackson

Name	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection?
Spirit Lake WPA	10136236	160	\$200,000	Yes

### Nobles

Name	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection?
Round Lake WPA	10139208	104	\$150,000	Yes

## Section 2 - Protect Parcel List

### Lac qui Parle

Name	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection?	Hunting?	Fishing?
Lac qui Parle 1	11645230	31	\$110,000	No	No	No
Lac qui Parle 2	11845223	147	\$390,000	No	No	No
Lac qui Parle 3	11644205	40	\$94,000	No	No	No
Lac qui Parle 4	11943216	5	\$30,000	No	No	No
Lac qui Parle 5	11645204	195	\$500,000	No	No	No

### Lincoln

Name	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection?	Hunting?	Fishing?
Lincoln 1	11244235	640	\$2,500,000	No	No	No

## Section 2a - Protect Parcel with Bldgs

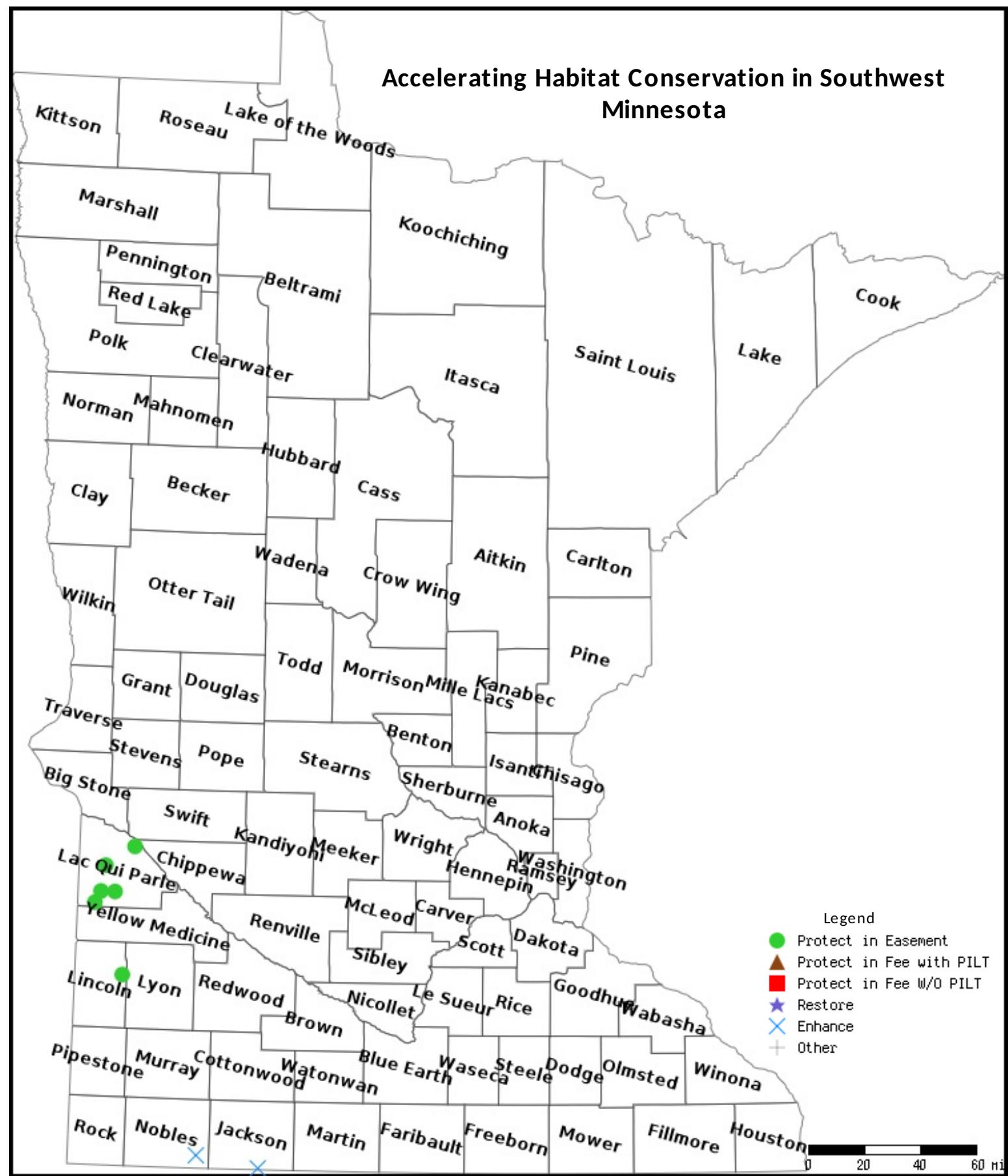
No parcels with an activity type protect and has buildings.

## Section 3 - Other Parcel Activity

No parcels with an other activity type.

## Parcel Map

### Accelerating Habitat Conservation in Southwest Minnesota



Data Generated From Parcel List



# Accelerating Habitat Conservation in Southwest Minnesota

## The Minnesota Land Trust is requesting \$6,653,300 for the first phase of the Accelerating Habitat Conservation in Southwest Minnesota Program.

The plight of prairies and wetlands in southwest Minnesota is well-documented; less than 2% of prairie remains and 90% of wetlands have been lost. This program will focus on priority areas within the Prairie Plan left orphaned by current conservation easement programs (operated by USFWS, MN DNR, and BWSR), and conservation priorities identified in the Wildlife Action Network that are not encompassed by the Prairie Plan.

The Land Trust will use our innovative landowner bid model to maximize conservation benefit and leverage private easement value. Restoration and enhancement will be in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

## How Does the Program Support State Goals?

This program will protect, restore, and enhance some of Minnesota's premier wetland and prairie habitat resources. This advances a primary goal identified by *Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan* through stabilization of Species in Greatest Conservation Need, the state's waterfowl population through the *Duck Plan*, and the full slate of prairie species through the *Prairie Plan*.



## Outdoor Heritage Fund Request:

\$6,653,300 for:

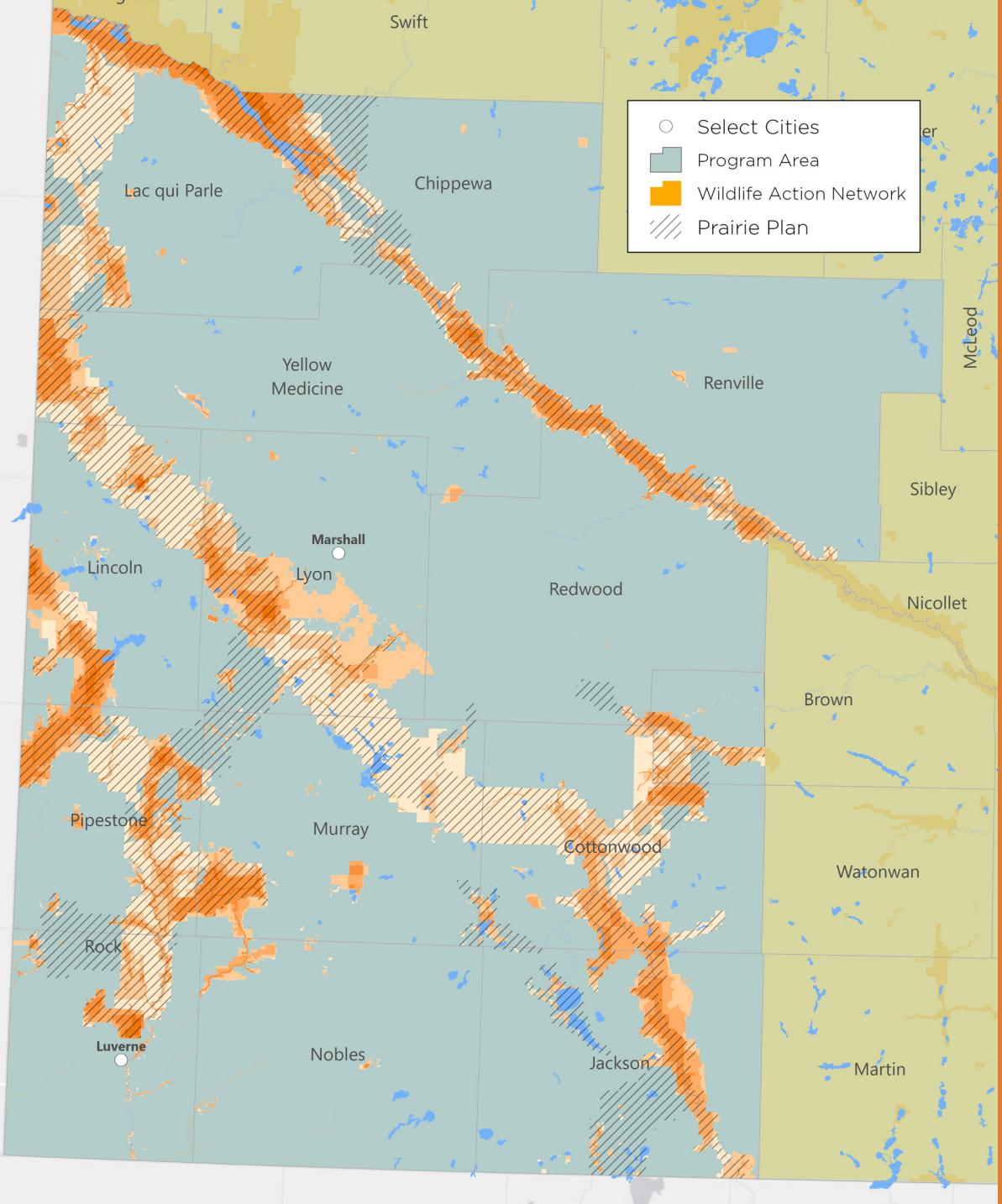
- 1,200 acres of perpetual conservation easements.
- 800 acres of restoration & enhancement.

The Minnesota Land Trust is a nationally-accredited conservation organization with a twenty-seven year history of protecting Minnesota's most unique wildlife habitats around the state.

For more information about this proposal, please contact Wayne Ostlie, Director of Land Protection, at 651-917-6292 or [wostlie@mnland.org](mailto:wostlie@mnland.org).

## What Are the Outcomes?

- High quality lands are protected through acquisition of perpetual conservation easements.
- Native habitats are restored and enhanced on existing eased lands.
- We work in partnership to ensure our activities are complementary to those undertaken by others.
- Increased participation of private land-owners in habitat projects.



The Land Trust works in partnership with conservation partners to ensure our activities are complementary to those undertaken by others working in the program area. By doing this we are taking a strategic approach of building complexes of high quality protected habitat, reducing fragmentation concerns and providing for connectivity between core habitat areas.



## Mission

The Minnesota Land Trust protects and restores Minnesota's most vital natural lands in order to provide wildlife habitat, clean water, outdoor experiences, and scenic beauty for generations to come.

## Contact Us

Minnesota Land Trust

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(651) 647-9590

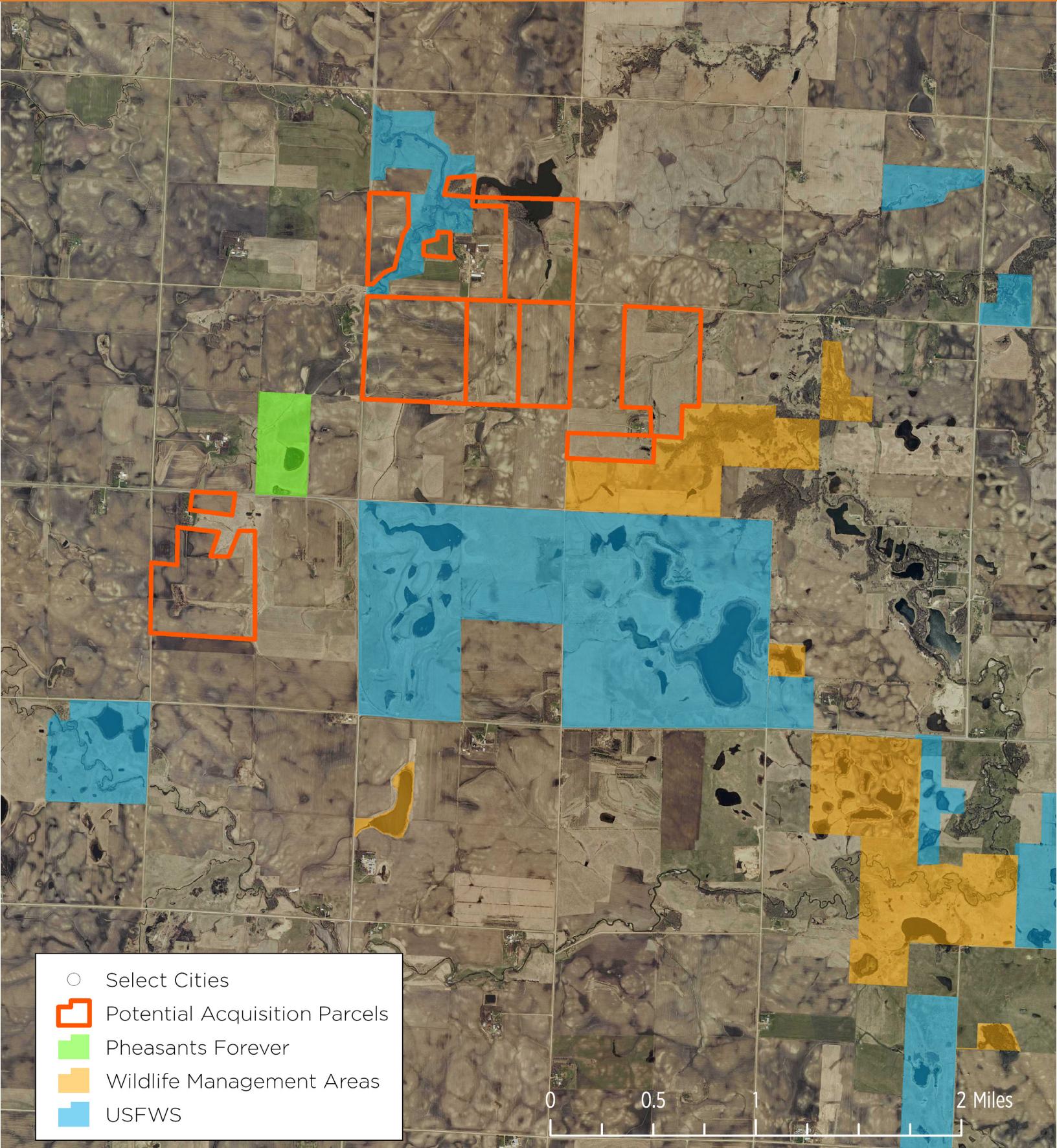
[mnland@mnland.org](mailto:mnland@mnland.org)

Visit us on the web at  
[www.mnland.org](http://www.mnland.org)



# Accelerating Habitat Conservation in Southwest Minnesota

## Potential Easement Acquisition





## MINNESOTA LAND TRUST

### A Decision Support Tool for Prioritizing Conservation Easement Opportunities

The Minnesota Land Trust often employs within its conservation program areas an RFP (Request for Proposals) model to both identify high-quality projects and introduce a level of competition into the easement acquisition process. Below, we briefly discuss how the system works and the framework put in place to sort the varied opportunities that come before us.

#### How the Ranking System Works

The parcel ranking framework employed through the Minnesota Land Trust's RFP process is intended as a **decision support tool** to aid in identifying, among the slate of landowners submitting bids for conservation easements, the most ecologically significant opportunities for the price. Using this framework, the Land Trust and its partners use an array of weighted data sets tailored to the specific circumstances inherent in a program area to identify those worthy of consideration.

It is important to note that this parcel ranking framework enables the Land Trust to rank projects *relative* to one another. That's important to do, but it's also important to understand how a project (or suite of projects) relates to the ideal situation (i.e., a project that is of exceptional size, condition and superb landscape context). If, for example, an RFP generated 20 proposals in a program area, the framework would effectively sift among them and identify the relatively good from those relatively bad. However, this information alone would not determine whether any of those parcels were of sufficient quality to pursue for protection (all may be of insufficient quality to warrant expenditure of funds). To solve this problem and make sure ranked projects are high priorities for conservation, we step back and evaluate them relative to the ideal - i.e., is each project among the best opportunities for conservation we can expect to find in the program area?

As part of its proposals to LSOHC, the Land Trust included easement sign-up criteria that laid out at a general level the framework utilized by the organization. Below is a more detailed description of the process the Land Trust utilizes in ranking potential parcels relative to one another, and identifying those with which a conservation easement will be pursued. We also include a ranking form illustrating the representative weighting applied to each criteria. These weightings will be refined as we move forward in applying this approach in each program area.

#### The Framework

We evaluate potential projects based on two primary factors: ecological significance and cost. Both are assessed independent of one another.

### **Factor 1: Ecological Significance**

The Ecological Significance score is determined by looking at 3 subfactors, each weighted equally (as a default). Each of these constitutes 1/3 of the total ecological significance score.

#### ***Subfactors:***

- **Size or Quantity** – the area of the parcel to be protected (how big is it?), length of shoreline, etc. The bigger the better.
- **Condition or Quality** – the condition of the natural communities and/or target species found on a parcel. The higher quality the better.
- **Landscape Context** – what's around the parcel, both ecologically and from a protected status standpoint. The more ecologically intact the surrounding landscape the better; the extent to which a parcel builds off of other protected lands to form complexes or corridors, the better.

Note that we have the ability to emphasize one subfactor over another if the specific circumstances warrant it, but we begin with a default standard at the onset. At present, all of our geographies are using the default standard, however because of the amount of hydrological alteration present across southwest Minnesota emphasis on restorable wetlands that provide multiple benefits will be a prominent component of the condition subfactor.

#### ***Indicators:***

A suite of weighted indicators is used to score each parcel relative to each of the above subfactors. Indicators are selected based on their ability to effectively inform the scoring of parcels relative to each of the respective subfactors. Weightings for each criterion are assessed and vetted to ensure that a set of indicators for each subfactor produces meaningful results, then applied across each of the proposed parcels. Finally, we vet and make improvements to the scoring matrix when we identify issues or circumstances where results seem erroneous.

Data sets used for this purpose must offer wall-to-wall coverage across the program area to ensure that bias for or against parcels does not creep into the equation. Where gaps in such coverages exist, we attempt to fill them in to the extent feasible (via field inventory, etc.). Finally, we vet and make improvements to the scoring matrix when we identify issues or circumstances where results seem erroneous.

### **Factor 2: Cost**

Cost is a second major factor used in our consideration of parcels. Although ecological significance is *the* primary factor in determining the merits of a project, our RFP programs also strive to make the greatest conservation impact with the most efficient use of State funds. As such, we look at the overall cost of each project relative to its ecological significance; we also ask landowners to consider donating all or some of their easement value to the cause and to better position their proposals. Many landowners participate in that fashion.

Cost, as a primary factor, is assessed independently of the ecological factors. Given equal ecological significance, a project of lower cost will be elevated over those of higher cost in the ranking. That said, exceptionally high quality projects are likely to be pursued even if no or modest landowner donation is put forward. Alternatively, there are projects offered as full donations that are not moved forward because their ecological significance is not acceptable. The degree to which cost factors into the ranking of parcels relative to one another is made on a case-by-case basis.

SWMN PROTECTION PROGRAM Conservation Easement Selection Worksheet		SITE 1	SITE 2	SITE 3	SITE 4	SITE 5	SITE 6	SITE 7	SITE 8	SITE 9	SITE 10	SITE 11	SITE 12	Notes
COUNTY														
100 Pts	ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE													
Weighting Factor	Size/Abundance of Habitat (33 points)													
	a) Size (33 pts): Acres of Parcel to be Protected by an Easement													
	SUBTOTAL:	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Weighting Factor	Quality of Natural Resources Protected by the Easement (33 points)													
	a) Habitat Quality (28 pts): Quality of Existing Ecological Systems (Terrestrial & Aquatic, as appropriate)													
	b) Imperiled Species (5 pts): Occurrences of Documented Rare Species on Parcel													
	SUBTOTAL:	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Weighting Factor	Landscape Context (34 points)													
	Current Status (30 points)													
	a) Protection Context (15 points)													
	i. Size of Contiguous Protected Lands													
	ii. Amount of Protected Lands within 3 miles of Property													
	: Protected Land within 0.5 miles of Property (4 pts)													
	: Protected Land 0.5-3 miles from Property (3 pts)													
	b) Ecological Context (15 points)													
	i. Size of Contiguous Ecological Habitat													
	ii. Amount of Ecological Habitat within 3 miles of Property													
	: Ecological Habitat within 0.5 miles of Property (4 pts)													
	: Ecological Habitat 0.5-3 miles from Property (3 pts)													
	Future Potential (4 points)													
	a) Conservation Plan Context (2 pts)													
	b) Amount of Existing Activity (2 pts)													
	SUBTOTAL:	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	TOTAL ECOLOGICAL VALUE POINTS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	COST													
	i. Bid amount (\$)/acre	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	
	ii. Estimated donative value (\$)/acre	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	
	TOTAL ACQUISITION COST (\$)	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	

KEY	
<span style="background-color: #90EE90; width: 15px; height: 15px; display: inline-block;"></span>	Priority
<span style="background-color: #FFDAB9; width: 15px; height: 15px; display: inline-block;"></span>	Possible
<span style="background-color: #F08080; width: 15px; height: 15px; display: inline-block;"></span>	Out

## SOUTHWEST MN PROTECTION PROGRAM

### ***Conservation Easement Selection Worksheet – Scoring and Criteria***

Three primary factors when taken together provide a good estimate of long-term viability for biodiversity: 1) **Size** of the occurrence (species population or example of natural community), 2) **Condition** of the occurrence, and 3) its **Landscape context**. This framework is used widely across the world by a large number of conservation organizations and agencies and here in Minnesota by the Minnesota DNR, USFWS, The Nature Conservancy and others. The Minnesota Land Trust has adopted this practice as well.

In this summary document, we provide an overview of the framework used by the Land Trust in assessing and prioritizing land protection opportunities before the organization.

1. **Habitat Size (33 points):** Parcels are scored based on acres of habitat to be protected through the easement relative to the largest parcels available for protection in the program area. Although size can pertain to species populations, the size of such populations is often constrained by available habitat. In addition, very little information pertaining to the size of species populations on a given property typically exists, making any determination suspect. Habitat size is a valid indicator in these circumstances.

**Scoring:** Parcels are scored by how they fall relative to twelve size classes of habitat:

0 pt	≤40 acres
3 pts	41-50 acres
6 pts	51-75 acres
9 pts	76-108 acres
12 pts	109-152 acres
15 pts	153-224 acres
18 pts	225-320 acres
21 pts	321-460 acres
27 pts	661-960 acres
30 pts	961-1300 acres
33 pts	>1300 acres

2. **Quality of Natural Resources (33 points):** Parcels are scored based on the quality or condition of occurrences of ecological communities (habitat) and imperiled species if known. As with Habitat Size above, population data for imperiled species is often minimal on private lands. As such, the condition of score is heavily influenced by the condition of natural communities on a property. However, we do allocate a modest level of points to the presence of imperiled species if they have been documented on a property.

**Scoring:** Parcels are scored based on the condition of focal ecological community targets – both terrestrial and freshwater – and presence of imperiled species on the property, as such:

- a) **Habitat Quality (28 points)** – The Minnesota Biological Survey natural community element occurrence ranking framework (for terrestrial systems) and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency fish and insect indices of biotic integrity are used to score habitat quality on parcels, as such:

- 0 pts Absence of natural communities; fish/insect IBI = 0-10.
- 4 pts Natural communities averaging D rank; fish/insect IBI = 10-20.
- 8 pts Natural communities averaging CD rank; fish/insect IBI = 20-40.
- 12 pts Natural communities averaging C rank; fish/insect IBI = 50-59.
- 16 pts Natural communities averaging BC rank; fish/insect IBI = 60-69.
- 20 pts Natural communities averaging B rank; fish/insect IBI = 70-79.
- 24 pts Natural communities averaging AB rank; IBI = 80-89.
- 28 pts Natural communities averaging A rank; IBI > 90.

**b) Imperiled Species (5 points)** – Scoring of the parcel is based on species abundance, as follows:

- 1 pt 1 occurrence
- 2 pts 2 occurrences
- 3 pts 3 occurrences
- 5 pts 4 or more occurrences

**3. Landscape Context (34 points):** Parcels are scored based current ecological context of the property and protected lands surrounding it; in addition, points are also allocated based on the likelihood that lands around a parcel will be protected going forward based on the identification of these adjacent lands in respective conservation lands.

**Scoring:** Parcels are scored based as follows:

**a) Protection Context (15 points)** – Is calculated based on two subfactors, including size of contiguous protected land (if any) and amount of protected land within 3 miles of the property. Here, we look at two subfactors:

i) Amount of protected land (acres) contiguous with the parcel. Scoring of the parcel is based on the amount of protected land contiguous to the parcel (8 points), as follows:

- 1 pt  $\leq 40$  acres of contiguous protected lands
- 2 pts 41-60 acres
- 3 pts 61-100 acres
- 4 pts 101-160 acres
- 5 pts 161-240 acres
- 6 pts 241-400 acres
- 7 pts 401-640 acres
- 8 pts  $> 640$  acres

ii) Amount of protected lands within a 3-mile radius of the parcel, whether contiguous or not (7 points). Blocks of habitat nearby but not contiguous can also play a very significant role in the maintenance of biodiversity over the long term. In this assessment, we weight protected lands within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of the parcel higher than those farther removed, and score them separately.

(a) Amount (acres) of protected land within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of protected property (4 points) – The amount of protected land within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of the parcel, scored as follows:

1 pt	$\leq 80$ acres of protected land
2 pts	81-360 acres
3 pts	361-640 acres
4 pts	>640 acres

Amount (acres) of protected land  $\frac{1}{2}$ -3 miles of the protected property (3 points) –

1 pt	$\leq 640$ acres of protected land
2 pts	641-2560 acres
3 pts	>2561 acres

- b) Ecological Context** (15 points) – As with Protection context, ecological context is calculated based on two subfactors, including size of contiguous ecological habitat (if any) and amount of ecological habitat within 3 miles of the property.

- i) Amount of ecological habitat (acres) contiguous with the parcel, providing species with direct access to larger blocks of permanent habitat (8 points). Scoring of the parcel is based on the amount of natural ecological habitat contiguous to the parcel, as follows:

1 pt	$\leq 80$ acres of contiguous habitat
2 pts	81-320 acres
3 pts	321-640 acres
4 pts	641-960 acres
5 pts	961-1920 acres
6 pts	1921-3840 acres
7 pts	3841-7680 acres
8 pts	>7680 acres

- ii) Amount of protected lands within a 3-mile radius of the parcel, whether contiguous or not (7 points). Blocks of habitat nearby, whether contiguous or not play a very significant role in the maintenance of biodiversity over the long term. In this assessment, we weight ecological habitat within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of the parcel higher than that farther removed, and score them separately.

Amount (acres) of protected land within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of protected property (4 points) – The amount of protected land within  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile of the parcel, scored as follows:

1 pt	$\leq 80$ acres of protected land
2 pts	81-360 acres
3 pts	361-640 acres
4 pts	>640 acres

Amount (acres) of protected land  $\frac{1}{2}$ -3 miles of the protected property (3 points) –

1 pt	$\leq 640$ acres of protected land
2 pts	641-2560 acres
3 pts	>2561 acres

- c) **Future Potential** (4 points) – The degree to which the area within which a parcel lies has been identified as a priority for conservation action and the degree to which action is being implemented in that area is a direct indicator of the long-term potential for maintenance of biodiversity associated with a parcel. Lands affiliated with priority areas are more likely to be complemented with additional levels of nearby protected lands than those outside of priority areas. In areas experiencing high levels of development, this factor may carry a significant amount of weight in setting protection priorities.

**Scoring:** Parcels are scored based on two subfactors: 1) their position relative to priority areas identified in statewide or local planning efforts, and 2) the degree to which action is being implemented within a priority area.

- |       |  |
|-------|--|
| 0 pts | Parcel not within priority area                                |
| 1 pt  | Parcel within priority area; minimal activity occurring        |
| 2 pts | Parcel within priority area; modest activity occurring         |
| 3 pts | Parcel within priority area; good levels of activity occurring |
| 4 pts | Parcel within priority area; high levels of activity occurring |