



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Hardwood Hills Habitat Conservation Program - Phase 2
ML 2025 Request for Funding

General Information

Date: 06/03/2024

Proposal Title: Hardwood Hills Habitat Conservation Program - Phase 2

Funds Requested: \$5,145,000

Confirmed Leverage Funds: -

Is this proposal Scalable?: Yes

Manager Information

Manager's Name: Wayne Ostlie

Title: Director of Land Protection

Organization: Minnesota Land Trust

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Location Information

County Location(s):

Eco regions in which work will take place:

- Forest / Prairie Transition

Activity types:

- Protect in Easement

Priority resources addressed by activity:

- Forest

Narrative

Abstract

The Hardwood Hills Habitat Conservation Program is focused on the protection of remaining high-quality forest systems and their associated biota within the Hardwood Hills ecological section of west-central Minnesota. Over 60% of forests in the Hardwood Hills have been lost to conversion over the past century, with growth along the I-94 corridor near St. Cloud and lakeshore development posing significant threats. In this second phase of the program, Minnesota Land Trust and Saint John's University will protect via permanent conservation easement 1,150 acres of priority forest and wetland habitats within the program area.

Design and Scope of Work

The Hardwood Hills subsection is an ecologically rich landscape in west-central Minnesota, where forests meet prairies. It encompasses approximately 3.5 million acres and consists of steep slopes and high rolling hills that were formed during the last ice age when massive glaciers sculpted the region. Scattered between these rolling hills are abundant kettle lakes and wetlands.

This transition zone includes a diversity of forest, prairie, and savanna habitats, numerous lakes and wetlands, and abundant wildlife, including 85 Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). Our overarching program goal is to afford protection to the remaining high-quality ecological systems and their associated species in the Hardwood Hills, as represented in the State's Wildlife Action Network.

In this second phase of the Hardwood Hills Habitat Conservation Program, program partners are prioritizing action within areas identified in Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025 (WAN). The areas contain high-quality habitats and harbor numerous rare species, including American ginseng, cerulean warbler, red-shouldered hawk, and Blanding's turtle. Prioritization will be focused on areas under greatest threat - from development, parcelization and other factors. Among these is the Avon Hills, a 65,000-acre natural landscape located just 15 miles northwest of St. Cloud and along the I-94 corridor. This hilly glacial moraine landscape contains the highest concentration of native plant communities in Stearns County, including oak and maple-basswood forests, tamarack and mixed-hardwood swamps, and wet meadows. The area is also a designated Audubon Important Bird Area.

The Minnesota Land Trust (MLT) and Saint John's University (SJU) have a long-standing and successful partnership to protect the Avon Hills. With the assistance of the State of Minnesota and conservation-minded landowners, 6,765 acres of the Avon Hills have already been protected. We intend to expand this model of success to other priority areas within the Hardwood Hills as prioritized by the WAN. As of May 2024, landowners in this program area owning approximately 1,300 acres are interested in permanently protecting their properties with conservation easements. Protecting these strategic parcels far exceeds available funding through our previous OHF grant. We anticipate significantly more interested landowners as outreach efforts continue.

MLT will secure conservation easements from willing landowners to protect the highest quality wildlife habitat remaining within the Hardwood Hills and steward them in perpetuity. Employing a market-based approach to identifying and procuring easements, program partners will encourage landowners to donate significant portions of their easement value, representing a significant cost savings to the state. SJU will conduct outreach within our priority areas to encourage landowners to protect their properties with a conservation easement.

Explain how the proposal addresses habitat protection, restoration, and/or enhancement for fish, game & wildlife, including threatened or endangered species conservation

Permanently protecting the unique and threatened forest systems of the Hardwood Hills is critical to maintaining native plant and wildlife biodiversity in Minnesota. This is especially true for migratory songbirds and other avian species that rely on this broadleaf forest system for food and shelter along the larger Mississippi Flyway.

Upland deciduous (maple-basswood, aspen, and oak) forests are considered key habitats for SGCN within the Hardwood Hills. Habitat loss and degradation impact 86 percent of the SGCN occurring within the program area. Land protection efforts will directly benefit a significant percent of the 85 SGCN that occur in the program area, including; red-shouldered hawk, Blanding's turtle, and four-toed salamander, common mudpuppy, red-shouldered hawk, veery, least weasel, fluted-shell mollusk, least darter, smooth green snake, and pollinators such as bumblebees and yellow swallowtail butterflies.

Land protection work will be focused on building complexes of protected habitat by linking together protected lands into a greater whole. With 92 percent of forest lands in the Hardwood Hills in private ownership, conservation easements can play a pivotal role in ensuring long-term protection of these critical forest resources.

What are the elements of this proposal that are critical from a timing perspective?

The majority of the Hardwood Hills is privately-owned; high development pressure continues to increase and threaten critical pieces of the existing ecosystem. Pressures from nearby cities, including St. Cloud and Alexandria, and along the I-94 corridor make the area a highly sought-after development area. Lakeshore and associated recreational land development are having a growing impact across the program area.

Six types of forested communities found in west-central Minnesota are considered "imperiled" statewide by the DNR. It is critical to protect these natural communities. Our program is currently working on seven conservation easement projects, several of these are anticipated to close in summer 2024. We have garnered additional interest from landowners owning over 1,300 acres. Properties in the application pool include large tracts of high-quality forest and land adjacent to important waterbodies. The need and landowner interest are exceptionally high. Interest in participation is outstripping available funding.

Describe how the proposal expands habitat corridors or complexes and/or addresses habitat fragmentation:

This program is focused on protecting priority forest and wetland habitats within Hardwood Hills subsection as guided by the State Wildlife Action Plan and the Minnesota Biological Survey (MBS). Specific parcels will be evaluated and prioritized for protection 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) and the level of payment the landowner is willing to accept (cost). The landscape context factor tilts protection of properties toward those that are adjacent to existing protected lands or that otherwise fall within priority conservation areas identified through various plans.

The program serves to build upon past conservation investments in the program area, expand the footprint of existing protected areas, facilitate the protection of habitat corridors and reduce the potential for fragmentation of existing habitats. MBS data is 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.

Which top 2 Conservation Plans referenced in MS97A.056, subd. 3a are most applicable to this project?

- Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025
- Outdoor Heritage Fund: A 25 Year Framework

Explain how this proposal will uniquely address habitat resilience to climate change and its anticipated effects on game, fish & wildlife species utilizing the protected or restored/enhanced habitat this proposal targets.

Using The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Land Mapping Tool, our Partnership targets properties for protection that provide the best opportunities for maintaining biodiversity in the face of climate change. Increasing connectivity and targeting climate-resilient sites sets the stage for a resilient landscape.

Protecting complexes of large and connected habitat blocks reduces fragmentation and allows for species movement as climate changes. Protecting forested lands improves water retention, which promotes resilience to drought both in upland systems and associated streams and rivers. Additionally, protecting forests and associated biota is crucial in mitigating against flooding caused by excessive rainfall events given their water retention ability.

Furthermore, permanently protected, and well-managed forests are at lower risk to stressors such as invasive species, pests, and pathogens due to their managed status and improved overall health. Limiting stressors will further promote the ability of biota associated with these protected lands to persist in a changing climate.

Which LSOHC section priorities are addressed in this proposal?

Forest / Prairie Transition

- Protect, restore, and enhance habitat for waterfowl, upland birds, and species of greatest conservation need

Describe how this project/program will produce and demonstrate a significant and permanent conservation legacy and/or outcomes for fish, game, and wildlife, and if not permanent outcomes, why it is important to undertake at this time:

In this second phase of our program, the MLT and SJU will focus their protection work on key forest and wetland habitats within the larger Hardwood Hills subsection. High quality lands are protected through acquisition of perpetual conservation easements. 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 concerns, 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 the Hardwood Hills program area identified through the plan listed above. Opportunities within the program area are identified and prioritized based on the potential to build a permanent conservation legacy that includes positive outcomes for wildlife and the public.

Outcomes

Programs in forest-prairie transition region:

- Protected, restored, and enhanced nesting and migratory habitat for waterfowl, upland birds, and species of greatest conservation need ~ *This program will permanently protect 1,150 acres of forest and wetland habitat in the forest-prairie transition region. Measure: Acres protected; acres restored; acres enhanced.*

What other dedicated funds may collaborate with or contribute to this proposal?

- N/A

Per MS 97A.056, Subd. 24, Please explain 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 provided to MLT and SJU 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.

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

The land protected through conservation easements will be sustained through state-of-the-art standards and practices for conservation easement stewardship. MLT 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 and SJU will work with landowners on an ongoing basis to provide habitat restoration plans, resources, and technical expertise to undertake restoration, enhancement, and ongoing management of these properties.

Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2029 and in perpetuity	MLT Long-Term Stewardship and Enforcement Fund	Annual monitoring of easements in perpetuity	Enforcement as necessary	-

Provide an assessment of how your program may celebrate cultural diversity or reach diverse communities in Minnesota, including reaching low- and moderate-income households:

One of MLT’s core values is a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We work to demonstrate this commitment when possible. For example, in this program area, we are currently working to protect a property that is home to the Avon Hills Folk School. This school serves a diverse audience and looks to create the opportunity for community to happen within the natural splendor of the Avon Hills. We look to find other opportunities to protect critical habitat associated within camps and nature centers that serve diverse constituencies, allowing access to nature in a welcoming and safe environment.

Additionally, MLT intends to continue to use diversity, equity, and inclusion as a lens in project, partner, and contractor selection. We intend to continue to listen and seek out potential, authentic partnerships that can advance our goals of conserving the best of Minnesota’s remaining habitats and, at the same time, being a more inclusive organization. One related program the Land Trust recently launched is the “Ambassador Lands Program”

which connects willing conservation landowners to diverse community groups that desire access to private land for a variety of programming purposes, such as youth mentor hunts, cultural or ceremonial use, nature based education, and much more.

Similarly, SJU's core Benedictine value of respect for human dignity requires respect to embrace the marginalized, and break down the privileges that exclude those who are different or disadvantaged. SJU initiated a campus-wide endeavor in 2018 to support programs focused on inclusive community building. Through that undertaking, SJU assembled an Outdoor U Inclusivity Team. SJU's Outdoor U Inclusivity Team will work to broaden access to the proposed outreach offerings within this proposal to underrepresented and marginalized students as well as to the surrounding community. This includes St. Cloud and its surrounding suburbs, which have grown increasingly diverse and is home to the largest concentration of our state's BIPOC population outside of the Twin Cities metro,

Finally, MLT and SJU both welcome more conversations with the LSOHC and conservation community about how these values can be better manifested in all our shared work.

Activity Details

Requirements

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

Yes

Land Use

Will there be planting of any crop on OHF land purchased or restored in this program, either by the proposer or the end owner of the property, outside of the initial restoration of the land?

Yes

Explain what will be planted and include the maximum percentage of any acquired parcel that would be planted into foodplots by the proposer or the end owner of the property:

The purpose of the Land Trust's conservation easements is to protect 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 include a small percentage of agricultural lands if it is not feasible to exclude those areas. In such cases, however, we will not use OHF funds to pay the landowners for that portion of the conservation easement.

Will insecticides or fungicides (including neonicotinoid and fungicide treated seed) be used within any activities of this proposal either in the process of restoration or use as food plots?

-

Will the eased land be open for public use?

No

Are there currently trails or roads on any of the proposed acquisitions?

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 and would require Land Trust approval.

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

Will the land that you acquire (fee or easement) be restored or enhanced within this proposal's funding and availability?

No

Explain how, when, and source of the R/E work:

Our priority for land protection is intact natural habitats. If some portion of a protected property requires restoration, the property will be evaluated and funding sought after developing the restoration plan and detailed cost estimates.

Other OHF Appropriation Awards

Have you received OHF dollars through LSOHC in the past?

Yes

Are any of these past appropriations still OPEN?

Yes

Approp Year	Funding Amount Received	Amount Spent to Date	Funding Remaining	% Spent to Date
2023	\$1,719,000	\$354,408	\$1,364,592	20.62%
Totals	\$1,719,000	\$354,408	\$1,364,592	20.62%

Timeline

Activity Name	Estimated Completion Date
Conservation easements completed	June 30, 2029

Budget

Grand Totals Across All Partnerships

Item	Funding Request	Total Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Personnel	\$380,000	-	-	\$380,000
Contracts	\$189,000	-	-	\$189,000
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$3,500,000	\$525,000	-, Landowners	\$4,025,000
Easement Stewardship	\$476,000	-	-	\$476,000
Travel	\$15,000	-	-	\$15,000
Professional Services	\$465,000	-	-	\$465,000
Direct Support Services	\$81,000	-	-	\$81,000
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	\$3,000	-	-	\$3,000
Supplies/Materials	\$36,000	-	-	\$36,000
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$5,145,000	\$525,000	-	\$5,670,000

Partner: Minnesota Land Trust

Totals

Item	Funding Request	Total Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Personnel	\$300,000	-	-	\$300,000
Contracts	\$129,000	-	-	\$129,000
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$3,500,000	\$525,000	Landowners	\$4,025,000
Easement Stewardship	\$476,000	-	-	\$476,000
Travel	\$15,000	-	-	\$15,000
Professional Services	\$465,000	-	-	\$465,000
Direct Support Services	\$81,000	-	-	\$81,000
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	\$3,000	-	-	\$3,000
Supplies/Materials	\$1,000	-	-	\$1,000
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$4,970,000	\$525,000	-	\$5,495,000

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Funding Request	Total Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
MLT Protection Staff	0.75	4.0	\$300,000	-	-	\$300,000

Partner: St. Johns University

Totals

Item	Funding Request	Total Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Personnel	\$80,000	-	-	\$80,000
Contracts	\$60,000	-	-	\$60,000
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	-	-	-	-
Easement Stewardship	-	-	-	-
Travel	-	-	-	-
Professional Services	-	-	-	-
Direct Support Services	-	-	-	-
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	\$35,000	-	-	\$35,000
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$175,000	-	-	\$175,000

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Funding Request	Total Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
SJU Staff	0.18	4.0	\$80,000	-	-	\$80,000

Amount of Request: \$5,145,000

Amount of Leverage: \$525,000

Leverage as a percent of the Request: 10.2%

DSS + Personnel: \$461,000

As a % of the total request: 8.96%

Easement Stewardship: \$476,000

As a % of the Easement Acquisition: 13.6%

Total Leverage (from above)	Amount Confirmed	% of Total Leverage	Amount Anticipated	% of Total Leverage
\$525,000	-	0.0%	\$525,000	100.0%

Detail leverage sources and confirmation of funds:

The Land Trust encourages landowners to fully or partially donate the value of conservation easements to the program; this leverage amount is a conservative estimate of value we expect to see donated by landowners.

Does this proposal have the ability to be scalable?

Yes

If the project received 50% of the requested funding

Describe how the scaling would affect acres/activities and if not proportionately reduced, why?

Outputs would be reduced by 50-60 percent. With this reduction, MLT result would be able to complete 6-8 projects totaling approximately 500 acres. Activities will be curtailed, but less than proportional, as some activities are fixed and necessary for program success.

Describe how personnel and DSS expenses would be adjusted and if not proportionately reduced, why?

Personnel and DSS will be scaled, but moderately less than proportional. Some costs are fixed (landowner recruitment; grant management) and must occur regardless of grant amount. Projects can fail midstream after investment of time. Donation of easement value (high in this program) can inflate the number of projects pursued/completed.

If the project received 30% of the requested funding

Describe how the scaling would affect acres/activities and if not proportionately reduced, why?

Outputs would be reduced by 70-75 percent. With this reduction, MLT result would be able to complete 4-5 projects totaling approximately 300 acres. Activities will be curtailed, but less than proportional, as some activities are fixed and necessary for program success.

Describe how personnel and DSS expenses would be adjusted and if not proportionately reduced, why?

Personnel and DSS will be scaled, but moderately less than proportional. Some costs are fixed (landowner recruitment; grant management) and must occur regardless of grant amount. Projects can fail midstream after investment of time. Donation of easement value (high in this program) can inflate the number of projects pursued/completed.

Personnel

Has funding for these positions been requested in the past?

Yes

Please explain the overlap of past and future staffing and position levels previously received and how that is coordinated over multiple years?

Each allocation is operationalized, budgeted, and tracked independently. FTEs listed in the proposal are a coarse estimate of the personnel time required to produce the grant deliverables put forward in this proposal. An array of staff draw from these funds for legal work, negotiating with landowners, crafting of conservation easements, writing baseline reports and managing the grant. We use only those personnel funds necessary to achieve the goals of the grant.

Contracts

What is included in the contracts line?

Funds in the contract line are for the writing of habitat management plans for protected easement properties and for conducting landowner outreach within the program area via qualified vendors.

Professional Services

What is included in the Professional Services line?

- Appraisals
- Other : Phase 1 Environmental Assessments, Minerals Reports, Mapping
- Surveys
- Title Insurance and Legal Fees

Easement Stewardship

What is the number of easements anticipated, cost per easement for stewardship, and explain how that amount is calculated?

The Land Trust expects to close up to 17 conservation easements under this appropriation. The average cost per easement to fund the Minnesota Land Trust's perpetual monitoring and enforcement obligations is \$28,000, although in extraordinary circumstances additional funding may be warranted. 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.

Travel

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 occasionally rent vehicles for grant-related purposes, which can be a cost savings over use of personal vehicles on longer trips.

I understand and agree that lodging, meals, and mileage must comply with the current MMB Commissioner Plan:

Yes

Direct Support Services

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 applied this DNR-approved rate only to personnel expenses to determine the total amount of direct support services requested through this grant.

Other Equipment/Tools

Give examples of the types of Equipment and Tools that will be purchased?

GPS devices, satellite communicator, safety gear, etc.

Federal Funds

Do you anticipate federal funds as a match for this program?

No

Output Tables

Acres by Resource Type (Table 1)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat	Total Acres
Restore	0	0	0	0	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	1,150	0	1,150
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	1,150	0	1,150

Total Requested Funding by Resource Type (Table 2)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat	Total Funding
Restore	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	\$5,145,000	-	\$5,145,000
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	\$5,145,000	-	\$5,145,000

Acres within each Ecological Section (Table 3)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Acres
Restore	0	0	0	0	0	0
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	1,150	0	0	0	1,150
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	1,150	0	0	0	1,150

Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section (Table 4)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest	Total Funding
Restore	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	\$5,145,000	-	-	-	\$5,145,000
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	\$5,145,000	-	-	-	\$5,145,000

Average Cost per Acre by Resource Type (Table 5)

Type	Wetland	Prairie	Forest	Habitat
Restore	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	\$4,473	-
Enhance	-	-	-	-

Average Cost per Acre by Ecological Section (Table 6)

Type	Metro/Urban	Forest/Prairie	SE Forest	Prairie	N. Forest
Restore	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	\$4,473	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

Parcels

Sign-up Criteria?

[Yes - Sign up criteria is attached](#)

Explain the process used to identify, prioritize, and select the parcels on your list:

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). SJU conducts outreach in the community to encourage landowner participation in the program; the Land Trust may also contract with SWCD offices or other vendors to further build the project pipeline.

Hardwood Hills Habitat Conservation Program

Phase 2



The Hardwood Hills is an ecologically rich landscape in west-central Minnesota, where forests meet prairies. Scattered between rolling hills are abundant kettle lakes, wetlands, forests, prairies, and savanna. Eighty-five Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) call this region home.

The Hardwood Hills is under great development pressure, especially in the southern portions of the subsection towards St. Cloud. Our overarching program goal is to afford protection to the remaining high-quality ecological systems and their associated species in the Hardwood Hills, as represented in the State's Wildlife Action Network.

How Does the Program Support State Goals?

This program is focused on protecting priority forest systems within Hardwood Hills subsection as guided by the State Wildlife Action Plan and the Minnesota Biological Survey. The program serves to build upon past conservation investments in the program area, expand the footprint of existing protected areas, facilitate the protection of habitat corridors, and reduce the potential for fragmentation of existing habitats.

Request **\$5,145,000**

Leverage **\$525,000**

Acres protected **1,150**

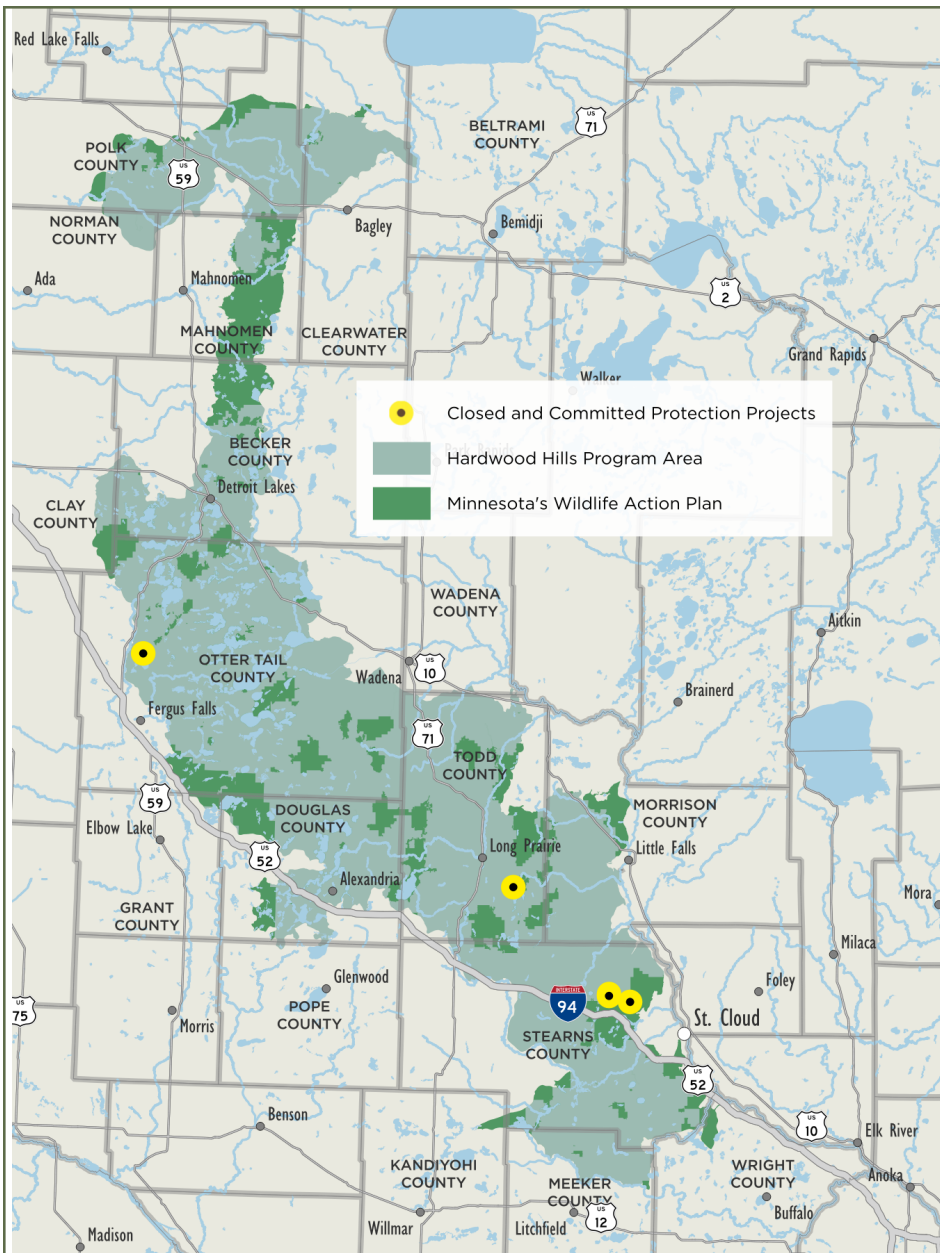
For more information:

Leah Hall
Program Manager
Minnesota Land Trust

lhall@mnland.org
(651) 240-7878

What Are the Outcomes?

- Permanently protect 1,150 acres of forest systems in the Hardwood Hills.
- Increased participation of private landowners in habitat projects.
- Land protection efforts will directly benefit SGCN that occur in the program area.



What has Been Accomplished to Date in the Program?

We are currently progressing seven conservation easement projects in this program area, with several of those projects expected to close in summer 2024. Current program applications far exceed available funding. We anticipate interest to grow as outreach efforts continue.

Program partners are prioritizing protection within high quality areas located in the program area—among these is the Avon Hills. The Minnesota Land Trust and St. Johns University have a long-standing and successful partnership to protect the Avon Hills. With the assistance of the State of Minnesota and conservation-minded landowners, 6,765 acres of the Avon Hills have been protected to date. This represents >27% of our ambitious goal of affording protection to 70% of the Avon Hills over the next 20 years.



Saint John's
UNIVERSITY



MINNESOTA
LAND TRUST



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.

HARDWOOD HILLS 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	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	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	0
TOTAL ECOLOGICAL VALUE POINTS		0	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	
	Priority
	Possible
	Out

HARDWOOD HILLS 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
- 3 pts 3

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 ≤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 ½ mile of the parcel higher than those farther removed, and score them separately.

(a) Amount (acres) of protected land within ½ mile of protected property (4 points) – The amount of protected land within ½ mile of the parcel, scored as follows:

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

Amount (acres) of protected land ½-3 miles of the protected property (3 points) –

- 1 pt ≤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 ≤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 ½ mile of the parcel higher than that farther removed, and score them separately.

Amount (acres) of protected land within ½ mile of protected property (4 points) – The amount of protected land within ½ mile of the parcel, scored as follows:

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

Amount (acres) of protected land ½-3 miles of the protected property (3 points) –

- 1 pt ≤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