



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Southeast Minnesota Protection and Restoration - Phase III

Laws of Minnesota 2015 Final Report

General Information

Date: 08/17/2025

Project Title: Southeast Minnesota Protection and Restoration - Phase III

Funds Recommended: \$2,910,000

Legislative Citation: ML 2015, First Sp. Session, Ch. 2, Art. 1, Sec. 2, Subd. 3(b)

Appropriation Language: \$2,910,000 in the first year is to the commissioner of natural resources for an agreement with The Nature Conservancy to acquire land in fee for wildlife management purposes under Minnesota Statutes, section 86A.05, subdivision 8; to acquire land in fee for scientific and natural areas under Minnesota Statutes, section 86A.05, subdivision 5; for state forest purposes under Minnesota Statutes, section 86A.05, subdivision 7; and to enhance grasslands, forest, and savanna. A list of proposed acquisitions must be provided as part of the required accomplishment plan.

Manager Information

Manager's Name: Richard Biske

Title: Freshwater Conservation Program Director

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Location Information

County Location(s): Fillmore, Houston and Winona.

Eco regions in which work will take place:

Southeast Forest

Activity types:

Protect in Fee

Restore

Enhance

Priority resources addressed by activity:

Prairie

Forest

Habitat

Narrative

Summary of Accomplishments

The Nature Conservancy protected 78 acres of prairie and 453 acres of forest, creating 531 acres of public land with 3 miles of stream frontage for hunting and fishing. On those public lands we improved 510 acres of habitat not included in outcomes. Outcomes include 26 acres of forest restoration, 34 acres enhanced and 145 of enhanced prairie. Restored prairies and forests have added connectivity to the landscape, invasive species have been set back in critical areas for biodiversity, and high quality habitat for hunting, fishing, birding, and other outdoor recreation is newly accessible to the public.

Process & Methods

this project has two primary components: fee title acquisition of priority parcels, and restoration and enhancement of prairie and forest habitat in important complexes of protected habitat. Work done using this appropriation accomplished both of those objectives.

The Nature Conservancy used funds from this appropriation in acquiring 531 acres of land in fee from 5 landowners. These acquisition added 287 acres to 7 springs Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and Whitewater WMA under ownership of MN DNR Division of Fish and Wildlife and 244 acres to the Brightsdale and Gribben Creek units of the RJ Dorer Memorial Hardwood Forest under the Division of Forestry. This new public land protects over 3 miles of trout stream frontage, along with important forest and bluff prairie habitat. TNC worked closely with DNR in prioritizing and acquiring all of these units, and performing important restoration and enhancement work after acquisition.

Restoration and enhancement through this appropriation occurred both on tracts acquired with LSOHC funds, where TNC restored or enhanced 291 acres of forest and 110 acres of prairie, and other publicly owned land, where TNC completed projects that restored or enhanced 88 acres of forest and 226 acres of prairie. TNC worked with DNR staff, Conservation Corps MN, and local contractors to remove encroaching brush from large bluff prairies and oak savanna on several parcels. We used prescribed goat grazing to control buckthorn and honeysuckle on bluff prairies previously cleared, where a seedbank of invasive brush was threatening the restored site. We also treated invasive species in fire-dependent oak woods surrounding prairie areas, allowing future prescribed fire to manage larger areas and maintain the diverse transition zone that includes prairie, savanna and oak forest.

On several sites where bluff prairies had previously been restored, a seedbank of invasive buckthorn and honeysuckle was threatening the restorations. On these sites, TNC worked closely with staff from the Non-Game program within DNR to use prescribed goat grazing to control the encroaching brush. Repeated goat grazing is proving effective at defoliating brush on restored prairie sites that are difficult to treat through other means due to the challenging terrain. Defoliating the brush during the growing season both gradually weakens the undesirable species and frees resources for the desired grass community to re-establish on these sites. Over time, the expanding grass component will better carry fire and make prescribed burning more effective.

Both forest and prairie communities were restored on former agricultural fields, where the restoration not only added new acres of habitat, but reconnected existing habitat that had been fragmented by cropland. Prairies were planted by broadcasting seed on bare ground in early winter to allow natural scarification over the winter. Forest sites fields were planted through direct seeding in order to provide the best chance of having sufficient seedlings survive the expected impacts of deer browsing.

Finally, funds from this appropriation were necessary to remove structures from a large acquisition project purchase with subsequent LSOHC grants. Removing the buildings is a necessary step in returning the site to a natural condition where additional prairie and forest communities can be restored along several miles of Rush Creek in Fillmore County.

Working closely with partners was key to the success of this program. TNC worked with other local stakeholders including Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), DNR staff from multiple agencies, local contractors, and landowners in identifying opportunities, prioritizing projects, and completing them effectively. The collaboration built through this effort continues to benefit ongoing work funded through LSOHC and helps inform other conservation initiatives, such as local water planning and habitat monitoring carried out by other entities. TNC is committed to staying engaged in Southeast Minnesota and continuing the successful work of this partnership.

How did the program address habitats of significant value for wildlife species of greatest conservation need, threatened or endangered species, and/or list targeted species?

All work in this project was focused around priority conservation areas within the Blufflands Ecological Subsection, which contains more species of greatest conservation need than any other subsection in Minnesota. Conservation opportunity areas have been identified by The Nature Conservancy, MN DNR and others based on the MN Biological Survey, existing public land assets and the potential to expand and connect habitat complexes. Projects included will protect and improve habitat conditions for rare plants and animals along with popular game species in the region including whitetail deer, wild turkey and ruffed grouse. Most projects are situated along or near trout streams, protection and restoration will maintain and improve trout waters and fishing opportunities.

Projects funded through this appropriation have impacted known occurrences of 39 different plants, animals, or communities considered rare, threatened, endangered, or of special concern. These include plants such as goat's rue, snow trillium, and the endangered Iowa golden saxifrage; and animals such as timber rattlesnake, North American racer, and Blanchard's cricket frog.

How did the program use science-based targeting that leveraged or expanded corridors and complexes, reduced fragmentation, or protected areas in the MN County Biological Survey.

Enhancement and protection projects took place in conservation opportunity areas identified based on concentrations of native plant communities mapped by the MN Biological Survey (MBS) , rare features, existing conservation lands and the potential to expand habitat complexes and link them. As a result, roughly 65% of the habitat impacted by this award is of Moderate, High, or Outstanding significance to biodiversity according to the MBS.

Explain Partners, Supporters, & Opposition

The strength of our collaboration with local partners was key to our success. We collaborated with Minnesota Land Trust and the Trust for Public Land on landowner outreach. Priority areas were identified in partnership with multiple local stakeholders, especially members of the MN Forest Resource Council's Southeast Landscape Committee. We worked closely with MN DNR throughout this program from planning to implementation and

follow-up. Our coordination with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts has led to improved landowner outreach and connections to local landowners.

Every parcel protected under this award required the approval of county boards. While some local officials have had reservations around the acquisition of cropland, we have been communicating pro-actively with board members around potential projects in their districts to address concerns early in the process.

Exceptional challenges, expectations, failures, opportunities, or unique aspects of program

Enhancement funding in this award ended up being critical in responding to challenges observed on several goat prairies that had been cleared of cedar and invasive brush previously. On these sites, seedbanks of buckthorn, honeysuckle, and other undesirable species presented a threat to the recovering prairie communities. Funding from this award allowed TNC to work with MN DNR's Non-Game Wildlife program to use prescribed goat grazing to control the new growth of brush. Our adaptive management approach to using this innovative method has provided important lessons on techniques, approaches, and expectations for goat grazing and how it fits within and integrated control program for buckthorn..

The opportunity to restore habitat in a fragmented landscape allowed us to knit back critical connectivity in places key to biodiversity, reversing the historical trend of fragmentation.

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

N/A

What is the plan to sustain and/or maintain this work after the Outdoor Heritage Funds are expended?

The acquisitions completed through this appropriation were partially selected based on their proximity to existing public lands, and the ability to incorporate them into existing management. The restoration and enhancement projects are aimed towards returning degraded habitats to stable natural conditions. While the first several years of restoration and enhancement can require significant follow-up to allow natural communities to re-establish, once established, diverse and resilient communities will be better able to hold off encroachment from invasive species, and require less management over time for their maintenance.

Budget

Totals

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$108,500	\$118,500	\$118,600	-	-	-	\$108,500	\$118,600
Contracts	\$60,000	\$481,200	\$500,000	-	-	-	\$60,000	\$500,000
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	\$2,681,300	\$2,060,600	\$2,060,600	-	-	-	\$2,681,300	\$2,060,600
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Stewardship	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Travel	\$500	\$2,500	\$2,700	-	-	-	\$500	\$2,700
Professional Services	\$20,000	\$110,000	\$115,100	-	-	-	\$20,000	\$115,100
Direct Support Services	\$14,200	\$14,200	\$14,200	\$19,800	\$14,200	TNC	\$34,000	\$28,400
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	\$45,000	\$45,000	-	-	-	-	\$45,000
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	\$500	\$33,000	\$8,800	-	-	-	\$500	\$8,800
DNR IDP	\$25,000	\$45,000	\$45,000	-	-	-	\$25,000	\$45,000
Grand Total	\$2,910,000	\$2,910,000	\$2,910,000	\$19,800	\$14,200	-	\$2,929,800	\$2,924,200

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Amount Spent	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Protection Specialist/Technician	0.1	3.0	\$37,400	-	-	\$37,400
Project Manager	0.25	3.0	\$72,200	-	-	\$72,200
Grant Administrator	0.12	3.0	\$9,000	-	-	\$9,000

Direct Support Services

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

see attachment

Explain any budget challenges or successes:

During implementation, the need for more restoration and enhancement funding was identified, and a portion of the Protect W/PILT funding was redirected towards contracts for restoration and enhancement projects. We still accomplished significant protection successes through this award, but were also able to respond to the growing need to control brush on recovering prairie sites.

Total Revenue: \$0

Revenue Spent: \$0

Revenue Balance: \$0

Of the money disclosed above, what are the appropriate uses of the money:

E. This is not applicable as there was no revenue generated.

Output Tables

Acres by Resource Type (Table 1)

Type	Wetland (AP)	Wetland (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	Forest (AP)	Forest (Final)	Habitat (AP)	Habitat (Final)	Total Acres (AP)	Total Acres (Final)
Restore	0	0	0	0	0	53	0	0	0	53
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	80	78	523	453	0	0	603	531
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Enhance	0	0	56	189	0	172	0	0	56	361
Total	0	0	136	267	523	678	0	0	659	945

How many of these Prairie acres are Native Prairie? (Table 1b)

Type	Native Prairie (AP)	Native Prairie (Final)
Restore	0	0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	20	4
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	0
Enhance	56	51
Total	76	55

Total Requested Funding by Resource Type (Table 2)

Type	Wetland (AP)	Wetland (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	Forest (AP)	Forest (Final)	Habitat (AP)	Habitat (Final)	Total Funding (AP)	Total Funding (Final)
Restore	-	-	-	\$28,800	-	\$112,100	-	-	-	\$140,900
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	\$402,400	\$120,000	\$2,429,400	\$2,207,000	-	-	\$2,831,800	\$2,327,000
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	\$78,200	\$254,200	-	\$187,900	-	-	\$78,200	\$442,100
Total	-	-	\$480,600	\$403,000	\$2,429,400	\$2,507,000	-	-	\$2,910,000	\$2,910,000

Acres within each Ecological Section (Table 3)

Type	Metro / Urban (AP)	Metro / Urban (Final)	Forest / Prairie (AP)	Forest / Prairie (Final)	SE Forest (AP)	SE Forest (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	N. Forest (AP)	N. Forest (Final)	Total (AP)	Total (Final)
Restore	0	0	0	0	0	53	0	0	0	0	0	53
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	603	531	0	0	0	0	603	531
Protect in	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Fee w/o State PILT Liability												
Protect in Easement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Enhance	0	0	0	0	56	361	0	0	0	0	56	361
Total	0	0	0	0	659	945	0	0	0	0	659	945

Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section (Table 4)

Type	Metro / Urban (AP)	Metro / Urban (Final)	Forest / Prairie (AP)	Forest / Prairie (Final)	SE Forest (AP)	SE Forest (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	N. Forest (AP)	N. Forest (Final)	Total (AP)	Total (Final)
Restore	-	-	-	-	-	\$140,900	-	-	-	-	-	\$140,900
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	\$2,831,800	\$2,327,000	-	-	-	-	\$2,831,800	\$2,327,000
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Enhance	-	-	-	-	\$78,200	\$442,100	-	-	-	-	\$78,200	\$442,100
Total	-	-	-	-	\$2,910,000	\$2,910,000	-	-	-	-	\$2,910,000	\$2,910,000

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

3

Explain the success/shortage of acre goals

With funding from this award we impacted 736 acres, exceeding our goal of 659. We were able to meet or exceed most of the individual habitat and project type goals set in our proposal. Despite shifting funds from Protection to meet a need for additional enhancement funding, we still protected nearly 90% of our proposed protection acres, while far exceeding restoration and enhancement goals. Additionally, we completed restoration and enhancement on 319 acres of forest and 191 acres of prairie not reported here because they occurred on land previously protected or restored with other LSOHC funds.

Outcomes

Programs in southeast forest region:

Large corridors and complexes of biologically diverse wildlife habitat typical of the unglaciated region are restored and protected ~ *The land protected through this award grew existing complexes of public land representative of the Driftless Area, in one case bridging two separate parcels to increase access and connectivity. Growing the protected area in these critical habitat complexes better maintains functioning and connected habitat for a diverse set of species.*

Restoration work added connectivity to a fragmented landscape by returning habitat to previously cropped fields positioned between existing habitat.

Enhancement activities focused on improving habitat complexes that can be managed through landscape-scale processes through fire to maintain the natural heterogeneity of the region.

Parcels

Sign-up Criteria?

No

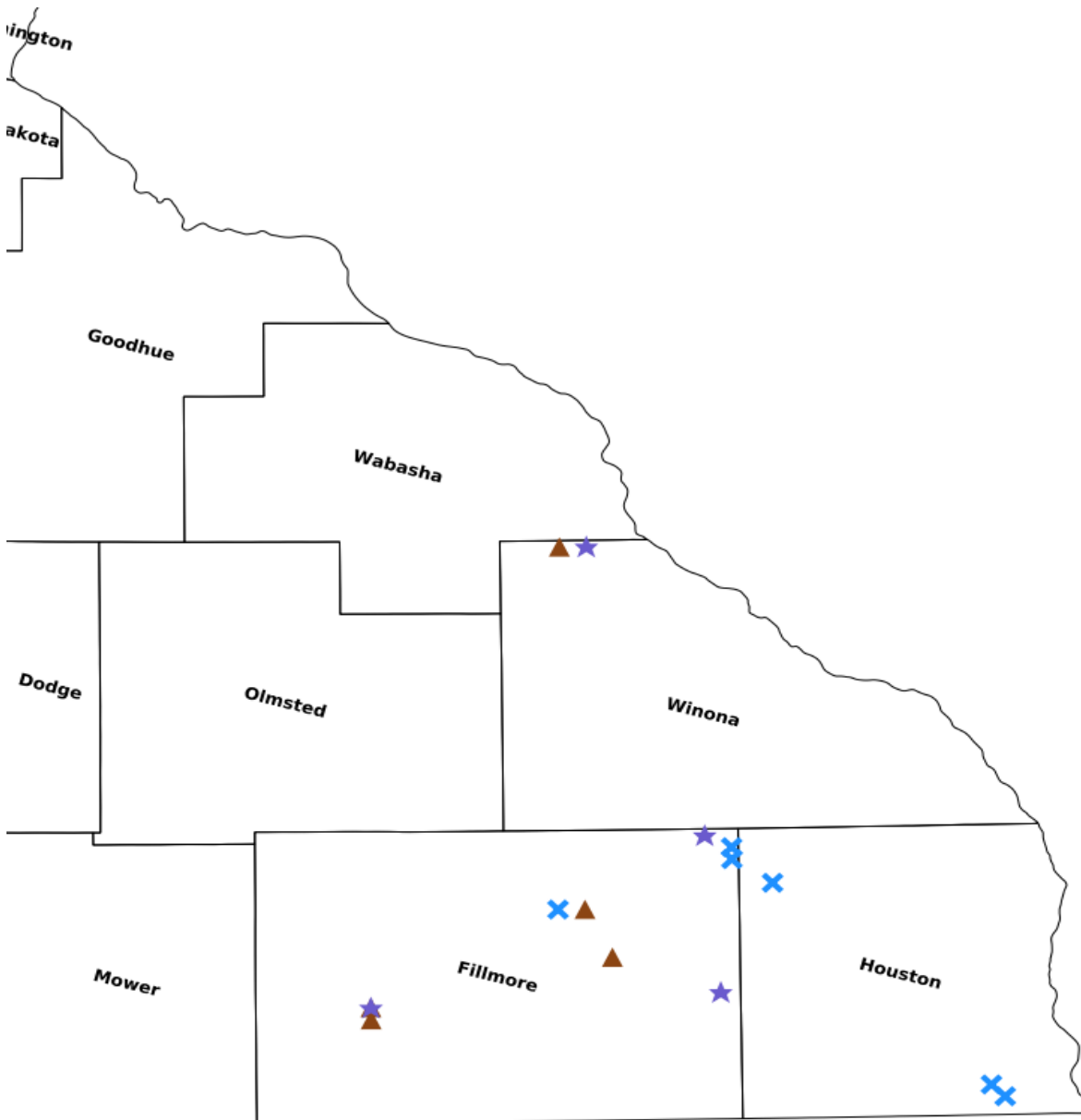
Restore / Enhance Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection	Description
7 Springs WMA	Fillmore	10212216	0	\$102,934	Yes	Hardwood forest direct seeding, floodplain forest, bluff prairie enhancement, mesic prairie seeding
Brightsdale Oak Woods	Fillmore	10310202	34	\$47,775	Yes	Oak forest enhancement through invasive brush control
Choice WMA	Fillmore	10208211	165	\$95,670	Yes	Mesic prairie restoration, floodplain forest restoration, oak savanna and bluff prairie enhancement, hardwood forest enhancement
Olson Tract	Fillmore	10408213	15	\$19,610	Yes	Invasive brush control through goat grazing.
Rush Creek B	Fillmore	10408203	0	\$146,530	Yes	Removal of structures and other debris following acquisition. prairie restoration and pasture grassland enhancement.
Rush Creek Woods	Fillmore	10408212	29	\$16,150	Yes	Invasive brush control through goat grazing.
Anderson Tract	Houston	10104219	48	\$36,936	Yes	Invasive brush control through goat grazing.
Hammel Unit	Houston	10104229	37	\$45,875	Yes	Invasive brush control through goat grazing.
Vinegar Ridge	Houston	10407228	60	\$36,660	Yes	Invasive brush control through goat grazing.
Whitewater Fields	Winona	10809206	26	\$34,860	Yes	Forest restoration through direct seeding.

Fee Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection
7 Springs 3	Fillmore	10212221	66	\$225,000	Yes
Brightsdale	Fillmore	10309206	132	\$455,700	No
Fillmore 1	Fillmore	10212216	177	\$278,000	No
Gribben	Fillmore	10309228	112	\$386,200	No
Winona 2	Winona	10810202	44	\$145,000	No

Parcel Map



0 4 8 12 mi

- Protect in Easement
- ▲ Protect in Fee with PILT
- Protect in Fee W/O PILT
- ★ Restore
- ✕ Enhance
- ✚ Other