



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

M.L. 2023 Approved Work Plan

General Information

ID Number: 2023-086

Staff Lead: Mike Campana

Date this document submitted to LCCMR: May 22, 2023

Project Title: Enhancing Knowledge of Minnesota River Fish Ecology

Project Budget: \$199,000

Project Manager Information

Name: Anthony Sindt

Organization: MN DNR - Fish and Wildlife Division

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Project Reporting

Date Work Plan Approved by LCCMR: June 22, 2023

Reporting Schedule: April 1 / October 1 of each year.

Project Completion: June 30, 2025

Final Report Due Date: August 14, 2025

Legal Information

Legal Citation: M.L. 2023, Chp. 60, Art. 2, Sec. 2, Subd. 03d

Appropriation Language: \$199,000 the first year is from the trust fund to the commissioner of natural resources to collect baseline information about the diets, distribution, status, and movement patterns of fish in the Minnesota River to inform management and conservation decisions.

Appropriation End Date: June 30, 2026

Narrative

Project Summary: Collect baseline information about lower trophic fish diets, the distribution and status of rare benthic fishes, and the movement patterns of large river fishes in the Minnesota River.

Describe the opportunity or problem your proposal seeks to address. Include any relevant background information.

The Minnesota River flows more than 320 miles across our state, providing tremendous fishing and recreation opportunities, and is home to a diversity of aquatic organisms including over 80 species of fish. Landscape alterations, population growth, climate change, invasive species, and conservation efforts continually affect this important resource. Unfortunately, there are still many data gaps that limit our ability to measure change over time and make informed management and conservation decisions. For instance, contemporary knowledge of the Minnesota River food web is insufficient for understanding changes that may be caused by invasive species or climate change. Existing knowledge about fish immigration and emigration between rivers also limits our understanding of appropriate management scales, and the status of several understudied fish species is largely unknown. In general, these and other knowledge gaps diminish the ability to measure change, understand important ecosystem functions, and most effectively monitor and manage the Minnesota River ecosystem. Leveraging the existing capacity of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (existing acoustic telemetry array, field equipment, staff expertise, etc.) provides an opportunity to cost effectively fill some of these data gaps with the proposed 2-year project.

What is your proposed solution to the problem or opportunity discussed above? Introduce us to the work you are seeking funding to do. You will be asked to expand on this proposed solution in Activities & Milestones.

The purpose of the proposed project activities is to fill existing knowledge gaps with baseline information about Minnesota River fish ecology. For activity 1 we will evaluate seasonal trends in diets of four lower trophic fish species that likely prey on phytoplankton, zooplankton, and other lower trophic food items. For activity 2 we will conduct benthic trawl surveys to evaluate the status and distribution of several understudied and difficult to capture bottom-dwelling fish species. For activity 3 we will leverage an existing array of acoustic transmitters within the Minnesota River (and connected waterways) to understand movement patterns, home ranges, habitat use, and emigration rates of three recreationally or commercially important fish species. Outcomes of the proposed project will contribute to the goals of A) protecting and enhancing populations of important fishes along with their critical habitats; B) providing the ability to measure ecosystem changes resulting from landscape alterations, climate change, and invasive species; and C) informing efforts to monitor, protect, and enhance this unique and important resource for all Minnesotans to enjoy and utilize. The MN DNR will use project funds to hire unclassified personnel, purchase equipment, and contract laboratory services necessary for achieving project objectives.

What are the specific project outcomes as they relate to the public purpose of protection, conservation, preservation, and enhancement of the state's natural resources?

Outcomes from this project will improve our fundamental understanding of the Minnesota River ecosystem and fish ecology. The MN DNR and other agencies will continue to build on the information gathered as part of this project and will utilize project outcomes to understand the impacts of future ecosystem changes (e.g., climate change, invasive species, land use alteration) and inform future management and conservation strategies that will benefit the ecological health and fisheries of the Minnesota River.

Project Location

What is the best scale for describing where your work will take place?

Watershed(s): Lower Minnesota River, Minnesota River - Headwaters, Minnesota River - Mankato, Minnesota River - Yellow Medicine River,

What is the best scale to describe the area impacted by your work?

Watershed(s): Lower Minnesota River, Minnesota River - Headwaters, Minnesota River - Mankato, Minnesota River - Yellow Medicine River,

When will the work impact occur?

During the Project

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Evaluate seasonal trends of lower trophic fish diets.

Activity Budget: \$127,870

Activity Description:

Several lower trophic fish species (Bigmouth Buffalo *Ictiobus cyprinellus*, Emerald Shiner *Notropis atherinoides*, Gizzard Shad *Dorosoma cepedianum*, and Spotfin Shiner *Cyprinella spiloptera*) are among the most abundant fishes in the Minnesota River and function as important prey for predatory fishes. Lower trophic fishes generally prey on phytoplankton, zooplankton, and other microscopic food items. Consequently, these species would likely be the most impacted by planktivorous Invasive Carps *Hypophthalmichthys* spp. if they ever established a population in the Minnesota River. For this project activity, we will establish a baseline understanding of seasonal trends and diet overlap of the four lower trophic fish species. Specifically, stomach or foregut contents will be removed from a subsample of the target species from an upstream and downstream reach of the Minnesota River during May (spring), July (summer), and September/October (fall). Additionally, phytoplankton and zooplankton samples will be collected from each study reach during each study period. Samples will be processed by a contracted laboratory and the data will be used to describe trends in lower trophic fish diets and evaluate diet overlap among the four study species.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Collect 720-870 fish stomach/foregut samples from four lower trophic fish species.	October 31, 2024
Collect 18 phytoplankton and zooplankton samples from the Minnesota River.	October 31, 2024
Describe seasonal trends in lower trophic fish diets along with diet overlap among species.	June 30, 2025
Complete a detailed final report for activity 1.	June 30, 2025

Activity 2: Evaluate the status and distribution of understudied bottom-dwelling fishes in the Minnesota River.

Activity Budget: \$29,650

Activity Description:

The status and distribution of several benthic (bottom-dwelling) fish species (i.e., Banded Darter *Etheostoma zonale*, River Darter *Percina shumardi*, Silver Chub *Macrhybopsis stoeriana*, and Western Sand Darter *Ammocrypta clara*) in the Minnesota River is poorly understood. These species are typically difficult to capture with traditional fisheries sampling methods (e.g., electrofishing, fyke nets) and are also potentially rare within the Minnesota River. Therefore, we will conduct benthic trawl surveys at approximately 20 different sites throughout the Minnesota River to expand the knowledge about the status and distribution of benthic fishes. In addition to some of the rarer fish species, benthic trawl surveys will also provide additional information about other unique benthic fish species such as Blue Suckers *Cyprinus elongatus* and Shovelnose Sturgeon *Scaphirhynchus platyrhynchus*.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Conduct benthic trawl surveys at approximately 10 Minnesota River reaches during August 2024.	August 31, 2024
Conduct benthic trawl surveys at approximately 10 Minnesota River reaches during September-October 2024.	October 31, 2024
Synthesize knowledge regarding the status and distribution of benthic fishes in the Minnesota River.	June 30, 2025
Complete a detailed final report for activity 2.	June 30, 2025

Activity 3: Utilize an existing acoustic telemetry array to describe movement patterns and habitat use of Bigmouth Buffalo, Channel Catfish, and Walleye.

Activity Budget: \$41,480

Activity Description:

An extensive array of acoustic receivers is currently maintained in the Minnesota River and downstream rivers (Mississippi River, St. Croix River). For this project activity we will leverage the existing telemetry array to increase our knowledge of movement patterns and habitat use of three recreationally or commercially important fishes in the Minnesota River: Bigmouth Buffalo, Channel Catfish *Ictalurus punctatus*, and Walleye *Sander vitreus*. Fish will be collected with electrofishing or hoop nets and acoustic transmitters will be surgically implanted into 12 fish of each species. Surgical implantation of transmitters will primarily occur during June 2024, but river conditions may postpone these efforts until later in the summer or early fall of 2024. Acoustic transmitters will provide telemetry data for 5–10 years. Outcomes from this study will refine our understanding of behaviors and movement patterns and evaluate the amount of movement between the Minnesota River and Mississippi River and their larger tributaries.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Surgically implant acoustic transmitters into 12 Bigmouth Buffalo, 12 Channel Catfish, and 12 Walleye.	September 30, 2024
Summarize movement patterns of tagged fish.	June 30, 2025
Complete a detailed final report for activity 3.	June 30, 2025

Dissemination

Describe your plans for dissemination, presentation, documentation, or sharing of data, results, samples, physical collections, and other products and how they will follow ENRTF Acknowledgement Requirements and Guidelines.

Most of the data collected for this project will be stored in DNR-Fisheries databases and considered “public data” available to other entities. During and after this project, outcomes will be presented at various scientific conferences (e.g., Minnesota Chapter of the American Fisheries Society, Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference). Additionally, we will seek opportunities to share the outcomes of this project with public stakeholders and other interested parties (e.g., Minnesota River Congress). Upon completion of this project, we will create detailed reports associated with each of the three project activities and the reports will be available to the public. We anticipate outcomes from activity 1 will likely contribute to a peer-reviewed publication in a scientific journal. Outcomes of this project may also be shared by the DNR via social media. The Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund will be acknowledged through use of the trust fund logo or attribution language on project print and electronic media, publications, signage, presentations, and other communications per the ENRTF Acknowledgement Guidelines.

Long-Term Implementation and Funding

Describe how the results will be implemented and how any ongoing effort will be funded. If not already addressed as part of the project, how will findings, results, and products developed be implemented after project completion? If additional work is needed, how will this work be funded?

The MN DNR currently conducts annual fish surveys on the Minnesota River to monitor game species populations and fish community health. Unfortunately, resources and typical funding sources are insufficient for thoroughly evaluating non-game fishes and other important components of the ecosystem. Outcomes of the proposed project will A) inform restoration, conservation, and management of unique large river fishes and their critical habitats; and B) enhance the ability to quantify impacts of future ecosystem changes. The MN DNR will continue to seek external funds to increase capacity for building upon the outcomes of past, current, and future projects.

Other ENRTF Appropriations Awarded in the Last Six Years

Name	Appropriation	Amount Awarded
Enhancing Understanding of Minnesota River Aquatic Ecosystem	M.L. 2016, Chp. 186, Sec. 2, Subd. 03i	\$500,000

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
NR Fisheries Specialist		Leads fieldwork and data management			35%	1		\$67,920
Summer interns		Assist with fieldwork			0%	0.5		\$15,600
							Sub Total	\$83,520
Contracts and Services								
TBD	Professional or Technical Service Contract	Identify and enumerate diet items from approximately 870 fish stomachs				0.25		\$65,250
TBD	Professional or Technical Service Contract	Identify and enumerate 18 phytoplankton and zooplankton samples				0.01		\$5,850
							Sub Total	\$71,100
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
	Equipment	36 acoustic transmitters (\$375 each)	Track movements of surgically implanted fish					\$13,500
	Tools and Supplies	Field and lab supplies	General supplies (sample bottles, preservatives, surgical tools, nitrile gloves, etc.)					\$6,775
	Tools and Supplies	Personal protective equipment	Life vests, work boots, rain jackets, etc.					\$600
							Sub Total	\$20,875
Capital Expenditures								
							Sub Total	-

Acquisitions and Stewardship								
							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Fleet cost for 9,000 miles at approximately \$0.75/mile (approximately 50 round trips to and from the Minnesota River)	Travel between the Hutchinson DNR office and the Minnesota River to conduct fieldwork.					\$6,750
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Meals and lodging associated with distant or overnight trips	Some fieldwork may require longer distance travel (>60 miles) and potentially overnight stays.					\$2,000
							Sub Total	\$8,750
Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-
Printing and Publication								
							Sub Total	-
Other Expenses								
		Direct and Necessary Costs	Direct and necessary costs cover HR Support (\$2,735), Safety Support (\$551), Financial Support (\$2,472), Communication Support (\$1,811), IT Support (\$6,166), and Planning Support (\$1,020).					\$14,755
							Sub Total	\$14,755
							Grand Total	\$199,000

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

Category/Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request
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Non ENRTF Funds

Category	Specific Source	Use	Status	\$ Amount
State				
In-Kind	Minnesota DNR Fisheries Section contribution	Office space, office overhead, technical & field support	Secured	\$6,000
In-Kind	Minnesota DNR Fisheries Section contribution	Boats, sampling gears (nets), telemetry equipment, and lab supplies that are already owned and maintained by the DNR.	Secured	\$15,000
In-Kind	Minnesota DNR Fisheries Section staff contribution	Existing staff time: Tony Sindt (project manager) - 10% FTE for 24 months, and Brian Schultz (project supervisor) - 5% FTE for 24 months	Secured	\$28,000
			State Sub Total	\$49,000
Non-State				
			Non State Sub Total	-
			Funds Total	\$49,000

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [643872d1-072.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

The goal of this study is to enhance knowledge of the lower trophic food web, understudied bottom-dwelling fishes, and fish movement and habitat use in the Minnesota River....

Optional Attachments

Support Letter, Photos, Media, Other

Title	File
Background Check Certification Form	6fa1c982-41c.pdf

Difference between Proposal and Work Plan

Describe changes from Proposal to Work Plan Stage

First, we refined the project location to the Minnesota River watersheds. Second, we wrote more measurable milestones for activities 1 and 3 (i.e., added numeric goals). Third, we fixed a small \$1 discrepancy in the budget (i.e., moved \$1 from the Direct and Necessary Costs to Tools and Supplies). Lastly, we added a description of our anticipated dissemination efforts.

Additional Acknowledgements and Conditions:

The following are acknowledgements and conditions beyond those already included in the above workplan:

Do you understand and acknowledge the ENRTF repayment requirements if the use of capital equipment changes?

N/A

Do you agree travel expenses must follow the "Commissioner's Plan" promulgated by the Commissioner of Management of Budget or, for University of Minnesota projects, the University of Minnesota plan?

Yes, I agree to the Commissioner's Plan.

Does your project have potential for royalties, copyrights, patents, or sale of products and assets?

No

Do you understand and acknowledge IP and revenue-return and sharing requirements in 116P.10?

N/A

Do you wish to request reinvestment of any revenues into your project instead of returning revenue to the ENRTF?

N/A

Does your project include original, hypothesis-driven research?

No

Does the organization have a fiscal agent for this project?

No