



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

M.L. 2026 Approved Work Plan

General Information

ID Number: 2026-498

Staff Lead: Erin Barton

Date this document submitted to LCCMR: May 21, 2026

Project Title: Advancing Bison Recovery and Stewardship Through Statewide Partnership

Project Budget: \$658,000

Project Manager Information

Name: Seth Stapleton

Organization: Minnesota Zoological Board

Office Telephone: (651) 539-6580

Email: seth.stapleton@state.mn.us

Web Address: <https://mnzoo.org/>

Project Reporting

Date Work Plan Approved by LCCMR: June 17, 2026

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

Project Completion: June 30, 2029

Final Report Due Date: August 14, 2029

Legal Information

Legal Citation: M.L. 2026, Chp. 104, Sec. 2, Subd. 06m

Appropriation Language: \$658,000 the second year is from the trust fund to the Minnesota Zoological Board to advance conservation of bison in Minnesota by coordinating and implementing the priorities of the multiagency Minnesota Bison Collaborative, including monitoring herd genetics and health, assessing potential reintroduction sites, and developing an educational framework and tools.

Appropriation End Date: June 30, 2029

Narrative

Project Summary: We will promote the conservation of bison in Minnesota to better fulfill integral ecological, cultural and economic roles by implementing the Minnesota Bison Collaborative, evaluating reintroduction sites, and building awareness.

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

Bison are one of North America's most iconic animals. Historically numbering in the tens of millions, including a robust population that ranged across most of Minnesota, bison populations declined precipitously in the 1800s. By 1880, Minnesota had lost its last wild bison, and the indigenous nations whose lives were so closely intertwined with bison nearly lost that connection entirely. Despite their historical importance in Minnesota, few today think of bison when conjuring images of our North Star State.

In recent decades, government agencies, conservation organizations, and tribal nations have worked to return bison to Minnesota to restore their ecological, cultural, and economic functions. Considerable progress has been made. Minnesotans once again can see bison roaming across open landscapes, but expansion remains limited by several factors. Little suitable habitat remains in Minnesota, and potential sites for reintroduction require evaluation and stewardship to ensure suitability. Additionally, isolated bison herds limited by space and herd size may face increased risks of disease and challenges to genetic health.

Although many groups are working to recover bison and address these issues, coordination among them was limited until recently. To restore sustainable bison populations that support land and people requires the collaboration of organizations across Minnesota.

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 Minnesota Bison Collaborative (MBC) was established in 2024 to facilitate bison conservation and support local cultures and economies. A diverse group of over two dozen organizations, government entities, and tribal nations comprise the MBC and are eager to advance its mission. The MBC envisions restored, sustainable populations of bison on ecologically healthy native habitats throughout Minnesota which support Indigenous cultures, food sovereignty and security, and nature-positive economies.

A dedicated coordinator was identified as a priority need to advance the MBC's work, with specific responsibilities including meeting facilitation and coordination, partnership building, support of conservation activities at satellite herds, and funding acquisition. We will work with partners internal and external to the MBC, including tribal nations, to identify and assess suitable sites for potential bison reintroductions. We will draft a report outlining a path for growing the presence of bison in Minnesota, including prioritized sites and recommendations for addressing barriers to herd expansion.

Finally, to build public awareness of and appreciation for bison, we will develop and utilize a diverse portfolio of educational and outreach resources detailing the history of bison, their ecological roles and cultural significance to indigenous nations, and current efforts of the MBC to restore bison.

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?

Bison are a keystone species native to Minnesota, positively impacting our natural ecosystems, local cultures, and economies, and this project will advance their recovery across the state. Specific outcomes include: 1) Minnesota's bison herd will be better positioned to support both land and people, with conservation actions guided by the Minnesota Bison Collaborative; 2) continued healthy, genetically diverse satellite herds; 3) prioritized recommendations for growth

of Minnesota's bison herd and associated barriers; and 4) increased public awareness of the critical roles of bison on Minnesota's landscapes and the work of the MBC to advance their conservation.

Project Location

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

Statewide

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

Statewide

When will the work impact occur?

During the Project and In the Future

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Coordinate the Minnesota Bison Collaborative and conduct conservation activities at satellite herds

Activity Budget: \$282,345

Activity Description:

In partnership with Minnesota Bison Collaborative members and other stakeholders, we will advance the MBC’s mission and support bison conservation and stewardship initiatives across the state. A dedicated MBC coordinator, identified as a primary need by participants during a 2024 workshop, will be tasked with implementing the priorities of the MBC. Specifically, the coordinator will facilitate the steering committee and working groups and organize partnership-wide meetings and communications to support information-sharing, establish action items, and evaluate our progress toward achieving our shared objectives.

We will also conduct conservation activities at several satellite herds across Minnesota. During these management events, we will apply ear tags to bison to ensure that animals are properly identifiable to meet regulatory standards and outfit a sample with GPS transmitters to document their habitat use. We will leverage the expertise of the Zoo’s Animal Health team to implement a preventative health care program in satellite herds and monitor health metrics via the collection and testing of biological samples. Finally, we will collect samples for genetic testing to assess herd diversity. These data will inform transfers among satellite herds and guide new acquisitions from herds outside Minnesota, which will be transported to MBC sites by Zoo staff.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Conduct bison management activities at satellite herds and submit samples for analysis. Year 1.	November 30, 2026
Coordinate MBC annual meeting. Develop report evaluating progress towards shared objectives and identifying action items.	June 30, 2027
Conduct bison management activities at satellite herds and submit samples for analysis. Year 2.	November 30, 2027
Coordinate MBC annual meeting. Develop report evaluating progress towards shared objectives and identifying action items.	June 30, 2028
Conduct bison management activities at satellite herds and submit samples for analysis. Year 3.	November 30, 2028
Complete deployment of GPS transmitters on bison.	November 30, 2028
Complete bison acquisition and transport from herds outside Minnesota to ensure genetic health and diversity.	November 30, 2028
Coordinate MBC annual meeting. Develop report evaluating progress towards shared objectives and identifying action items.	June 30, 2029

Activity 2: Evaluate potential bison reintroduction sites in Minnesota and assess barriers

Activity Budget: \$181,975

Activity Description:

We will chart a course for the continued recovery of bison in Minnesota and the restoration of their historic ecological and cultural roles. In close coordination with the MBC partnership, we will compile a list of candidate locations for bison reintroduction across the state and assess habitat suitability at these sites. Specifically, we will estimate the prevalence of invasive species; quantify overall vegetative diversity, an important habitat characteristic linked to suitability for bison; document adjacent land uses; and collect forage samples to test metrics such as nutrient and mineral content. These data also will inform the potential carrying capacities of individual tracts. We will complement this assessment by conducting vegetation assessments at Minnesota prairies that bison currently inhabit to improve our understanding of

forage preferences relative to availability. To support the implementation of these activities, we will hire a temporary, technician-level position.

We also will survey landowners and land managers to assess barriers to bison restoration at their sites and identify strategies to remove these obstacles. Using information gleaned from this work, we will develop formal recommendations to the MBC for expanding the statewide bison population, including a prioritized list of reintroduction sites and an evaluation of potential barriers.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Hire temporary natural resources technician / specialist to support implement of activities.	March 31, 2027
Identify candidate sites for bison reintroduction in close partnership with the MBC.	March 31, 2027
Conduct field sampling to assess habitat suitability. Submit samples for analysis. Year 1.	October 31, 2027
Conduct field sampling to assess habitat suitability. Submit samples for analysis. Year 2.	October 31, 2028
Survey landowners and managers to assess potential barriers to bison restoration.	November 30, 2028
Finalize recommendations for expanding the population of bison in Minnesota.	June 30, 2029

Activity 3: Build public awareness of bison as an integral component of Minnesota's landscapes

Activity Budget: \$193,680

Activity Description:

We will leverage the Zoo’s strength as Minnesota’s largest environmental educator to enhance public awareness of the important roles that bison fulfill and share the work of the MBC. We will engage MBC partners in workshops statewide to identify shared educational goals and establish a strategic framework to meet those goals. The framework will feature a resource toolkit that includes shared interpretive guidelines; standards and templates for signage, brochures, and banners; and educational materials for programming activities, adaptable for different audiences and sites. We will contract with an indigenous studies expert to develop a field trip package incorporating indigenous and ecological perspectives on bison management and to serve as a technical advisor, ensuring materials reflect bison’s significance to indigenous cultures.

We will design and maintain a website highlighting the importance of bison and the MBC’s work. This website will serve as a repository for research findings, toolkit resources, events, and news. We also will develop shared creative assets including a logo for the MBC.

Finally, we will pilot and refine the toolkit resources and educational strategies by installing new interpretive signage, engaging school field trip groups in educational experiences, and offering a variety of bison-focused public programming opportunities.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Facilitate statewide workshops and draft educational and outreach framework.	June 30, 2027
Draft educational, field trip, and outreach content and materials.	October 31, 2027
Design logo and creative toolkit elements including signage. Finalize and launch website.	December 31, 2028
Pilot toolkit, install signage, and deliver activities at Zoo.	May 31, 2029
Finalize and launch educational and outreach framework.	June 30, 2029

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Molly Tranel	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources	Coordination and support of bison conservation and management activities for the DNR. Support for overall implementation of the project, including Activities 1, 2 and 3.	No
Emily Peters	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources	Coordination and support of bison conservation and management activities for the DNR. Support for overall implementation of the project, including Activities 1, 2 and 3.	No
Darlene St. Clair	University of Minnesota	Technical expertise in Indigenous Studies. Support for implementation of Activity 3, particularly with respect to indigenous perspectives, and other project elements.	No
Forest Isbell	University of Minnesota	Technical expertise in how bison shape changes in biodiversity and ecosystems, including ecological impacts of bison reintroductions at Cedar Creek. Technical guidance and support for implementation of Activity 2 (assessment of potential reintroduction sites) and other project elements.	No
Dale Gentry	Audubon Upper Mississippi River	Director of Conservation. Technical expertise in grassland ecology and management. Support for implementation of Activities 1 and 2.	No
Jeff Johns	Minnesota Historical Society	Director of Historic Sites for the Minnesota Historical Society, which maintains potential reintroduction site(s) for bison. Support for implementation of Activity 2 (assessment of potential reintroduction sites).	No
Carleigh Dueck	Dakota County Parks	Natural Resources Bison Technician. Management of bison herd at Spring Lake Park Reserve. Support for implementation of Activities 1 and 2, with expertise in bison reintroductions and site management.	No

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.

Progress and activity updates will be shared across the diverse partnership of the Minnesota Bison Collaborative (MBC) through regular meetings and written communications and reports. Information about the efforts of the MBC and the work supported here will be disseminated to the general public through several outlets, including via new interpretive and educational resources which will be used by Zoo staff and partners in presentations to school groups, summer camps and at other public venues. We also will share information via new exhibit signage, on the MBC's newly developed website, and through the Minnesota Zoo's web page, social media outlets, and correspondence with member households. The MBC and its ability to serve as a model for diverse, conservation-focused partnerships elsewhere may be highlighted at professional conferences and in the scientific literature.

The Minnesota 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, 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 MBC is well-positioned to promote the recovery of bison and restore their ecological, cultural, and economic functions. This project will support coordination of the broad MBC partnership to help sustain current satellite herds and expand the presence of bison, thereby advancing conservation objectives. Evaluations of site suitability will inform future reintroductions and guide how we address site-specific barriers. Educational resources will be widely available via the website and used in a variety of settings to build awareness.

The Zoo and our MBC partners will continue to explore funding opportunities to ensure the ongoing success of bison initiatives in Minnesota.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
Conservation Biologist		Overall project implementation. Lead implementation of Activities 1 and 2, and support for implementation of Activity 3.			33%	1.5	X	\$204,300
Natural Resources Technician / Specialist		Primary support for implementation of Activity 2. Additional support for Activity 1.			24%	1.5		\$127,350
Veterinarian		Support for implementation of Activity 1, specifically in association with monitoring herd health and implementing preventative health care program.			19%	0.3	X	\$49,100
Public Program Specialist		Coordination and primary support for implementation of Activity 3.			33%	0.45	X	\$41,800
Intermittent Interpretive Naturalists		Support implementation of Activity 3, including deliverables associated with educational programming and related deliverables.			14%	0.3	X	\$22,470
							Sub Total	\$445,020
Contracts and Services								
TBD	Service Contract	Contract(s) with diagnostic laboratories to support testing for baseline health metrics and exposure to disease and parasites at satellite herds, in association with herd health monitoring. \$10,000 / year x 3 years.				0.15		\$30,000
Veterinary Genetics Laboratory, UC-Davis	Service Contract	Genetic testing of bison to assess overall herd diversity and individual parentage. 50 samples / year x 3 years.		X		0.06		\$11,250
TBD	Service Contract	Laboratory analysis to quantify nutrient and mineral content of forage at potential reintroduction sites. Analyses will also quantify variability in forage quality for focal species across different sites.				0.04		\$10,500
TBD	Service Contract	Freelance graphic designers to establish creative elements of Activity 3, including the interpretive signage, logo, and interpretive guide and toolkit.				0.04		\$6,000

TBD	Service Contract	Fabrication of permanent interpretive graphics / signage and custom sign brackets.				0.06		\$18,000
TBD	Service Contract	Program evaluator to create evaluation tools and analyze data from pilot launch of educational programming initiatives associated with Activity 3.				0.1		\$14,000
TBD	Service Contract	Subject matter expert in integrating indigenous perspectives into educational and interpretive programs, signage, and materials.				0.12		\$20,000
TBD	Service Contract	Website development to establish a repository for research and educational resources and share MBC's work with the public.				0.12		\$20,000
							Sub Total	\$129,750
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
	Tools and Supplies	Supplies associated with bison management and conservation activities at existing herds. RFID ear tags: \$60 / unit x 50 / year x 3 years; RFID readers: \$2,000; Scales: \$3,000; consumable sampling supplies: \$500 / year x 3 years.	Supplies necessary to manage and monitor bison at existing satellite herds.					\$15,500
	Equipment	GPS tags for bison. \$650 / unit x 15 units.	Collection of habitat use and spatial data of bison at existing satellite herds.					\$9,750
	Tools and Supplies	Field sampling supplies for vegetative analysis, including sampling tools, consumables, and fencing for constructing small exclosures. \$1,500 / year x 2 years.	Field sampling supplies for assessing habitat suitability at potential reintroduction sites.					\$3,000
	Tools and Supplies	Educational materials associated with Activity 3, including bison pelt (\$1,500), bison skulls (\$1,000), artificial or pressed prairies flowers (\$1,500 for 50 plants) and other materials based on specific program design (\$5,000).	Educational materials will be used in support of on-site and off-site educational programming.					\$9,000
	Tools and Supplies	Materials and supplies including pop-up banners, table-top sign holders, table coverings, and branded materials.	Tabling and outreach supplies for use in association with on-site and off-site educational programming (Activity 3).					\$4,680
							Sub Total	\$41,930
Capital Equipment								
							Sub Total	-

Acquisitions and Stewardship								
							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Fuel, accommodation and meals for work in state associated with Activity 1. Estimating 8 nights of travel / year x 3 years.	Travel to field sites for completion of bison conservation activities at existing satellite herds.					\$4,800
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Fuel, accommodation and meals for work in state associated with Activity 2. Estimating 30 nights of travel / year x 2 years.	Travel for field work at potential bison reintroduction sites around the state.					\$12,000
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Fuel, accommodation and meals for work in state associated with Activity 3. Estimating 8 nights of staff travel / workshop x 3 workshops.	Travel to partner workshops to identify priorities and shared educational goals in association with bison conservation in Minnesota.					\$4,800
							Sub Total	\$21,600
Travel Outside Minnesota								
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Fuel, accommodation and meals associated with acquisition of new bison. Estimating \$2,500 / acquisition x 2 acquisitions.	Out-of-state travel to acquire bison from federal herds or other partners for integration into the Minnesota herd.	X				\$5,000
							Sub Total	\$5,000
Printing and Publication								
	Printing	Printed materials including pamphlets (2-sided, folded, full color; 20,000 x \$0.25 / unit = \$5,000) and rack cards (2-sided, full color, 6x9 inch; 20,000 x \$0.25 / unit = \$5,000)	Printed materials developed as part of Activity 3 for distribution by MBC partners.					\$10,000
							Sub Total	\$10,000
Other Expenses								
		Shipping costs. Activity 1 sampling of bison: \$400 / year x 3 years. Activity 2 vegetation sampling: \$500 / year x 2 years.	Costs for shipping samples for laboratory analysis, associated with bison conservation activities (herd health monitoring and genetic analysis)					\$2,200

			and vegetation sampling at potential reintroduction sites.					
		Professional photo and artwork purchase and licensing.	Professional stock photos and artwork to be integrated into interpretive guide and toolkit and interpretive signage.					\$2,500
							Sub Total	\$4,700
							Grand Total	\$658,000

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

Category/Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request
Personnel - Conservation Biologist		Overall project implementation. Lead implementation of Activities 1 and 2, and support for implementation of Activity 3.	Classified : A classified staff position will be partially supported by these ENRTF funds. This staff member will have the necessary expertise required to successfully coordinate and implement the project, including Activities 1, 2 and 3. The ENRTF funding will make it possible for the staff member to work on this project for the percentage of time indicated in the budget. Without this funding they would not be able to support this project with their time. Responsibilities for the classified staff will be reprioritized and reallocated as necessary to support this project.
Personnel - Veterinarian		Support for implementation of Activity 1, specifically in association with monitoring herd health and implementing preventative health care program.	Classified : A classified staff position will be partially supported by these ENRTF funds. This staff member will have the necessary veterinary expertise required to successfully support the herd health monitoring outlined in Activity 1. The ENRTF funding will make it possible for the staff member to work on this project for the percentage of time indicated in the budget. Without this funding they would not be able to support this project with their time. Responsibilities for the classified staff will be reprioritized and reallocated as necessary to support this project.
Personnel - Public Program Specialist		Coordination and primary support for implementation of Activity 3.	Classified : A classified staff position will be partially supported by these ENRTF funds. This staff member will have the necessary educational expertise required to successfully coordinate Activity 3 and support the completion of the associated deliverables. The ENRTF funding will make it possible for the staff member to work on this project for the percentage of time indicated in the budget. Without this funding they would not be able to support this project with their time. Responsibilities for the classified staff will be reprioritized and reallocated as necessary to support this project.
Personnel - Intermittent Interpretive Naturalists		Support implementation of Activity 3, including deliverables associated with educational programming and related deliverables.	Classified : Intermittent Naturalist staff will have the necessary expertise required to successfully support the implementation of Activity 3. The ENRTF funding will make it possible for the staff member to work on this project for the percentage of time indicated in the budget. Without this funding they would not be able to support this project with their time. Responsibilities for the classified staff will be reprioritized and reallocated as necessary to support this project.
Contracts and Services - Veterinary Genetics Laboratory, UC-Davis	Service Contract	Genetic testing of bison to assess overall herd diversity and individual parentage. 50 samples / year x 3 years.	The Veterinary Genetics Laboratory has developed the necessary genetic markers to complete genetic analyses quantifying the genetic diversity and health of the herd. In addition, genetic analyses for bison from across the country have been – and continue to be – completed at this lab, such that the lab is able to provide a quantitative comparison of genetic metrics from Minnesota bison to reference herds around the nation. This capacity and historical sampling base are unmatched and necessary to inform wise management of bison within Minnesota.

Travel Outside Minnesota	Miles/Meals/Lodging	Fuel, accommodation and meals associated with acquisition of new bison. Estimating \$2,500 / acquisition x 2 acquisitions.	Integration of new genetics from external herds into Minnesota is essential to ensure the ongoing genetic health of bison in Minnesota.
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Non ENRTF Funds

Category	Specific Source	Use	Status	\$ Amount
State				
In-Kind	Minnesota Zoo General Operating budget	Administrative costs, utilities and other expenses associated with implementation of project activities, estimated at 15% of the total request.	Secured	\$98,700
In-Kind	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources budget	In-kind staffing support for implementation of project activities, estimated at 0.25 FTE / year x 3 years.	Secured	\$75,000
			State Sub Total	\$173,700
Non-State				
			Non State Sub Total	-
			Funds Total	\$173,700

Total Project Cost: \$831,700

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [f361d162-66d.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

This visual presents the project title and its overarching goal, as well as the integral roles bison fulfill. A compilation of photographs of bison, prairies, and educational programming helps to illustrate the proposed activities pertaining to the Minnesota Bison Collaborative, reintroduction sites, and public awareness. Partner logos are also displayed....

Supplemental Attachments

Capital Project Questionnaire, Budget Supplements, Support Letter, Photos, Media, Other

Title	File
Letter of Support - Audubon	60648169-c99.pdf
Letter of Support - Dakota County	5b7c4716-ced.pdf

Difference between Proposal and Work Plan

Describe changes from Proposal to Work Plan Stage

The budget has been updated to reflect the funding recommendation, and content on dissemination has been added. Requested revisions also have been completed.

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 understand that travel expenses are only approved if they 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 understand the Commissioner's Plan applies.

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

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

Does your project include the pre-design, design, construction, or renovation of a building, trail, campground, or other fixed capital asset costing \$10,000 or more or large-scale stream or wetland restoration?

No

Do you propose using an appropriation from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund to conduct a project that provides children's services (as defined in Minnesota Statutes section 299C.61 Subd.7 as "the provision of care, treatment, education, training, instruction, or recreation to children")?

Yes

Do you certify that background checks are performed for background check crimes, as defined in Minnesota Statutes, section 299C.61, Subd. 2, on all employees, contractors, and volunteers who have or may have access to a child to whom children's services are provided by your organization?

Yes

Provide the name(s) and organization(s) of additional individuals assisting in the completion of this project:

Mary Mallinger (Minnesota Zoo), Carol Strecker (Minnesota Zoo), Liz Gilles (Minnesota)

Do you understand that a named service contract does not constitute a funder-designated subrecipient or approval of a sole-source contract? In other words, a service contract entity is only approved if it has been selected according to the contracting rules identified in state law and policy for organizations that receive ENRTF funds through direct appropriations, or in the DNR's reimbursement manual for non-state organizations. These rules may include competitive bidding and prevailing wage requirements

Yes, I understand