

**Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund  
2016 Request for Proposals (RFP)**

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**Project Title:**

**ENRTF ID: 177-G**

Preserving the Avon Hills with Reverse-Bidding Easements

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**Category:** G. Land Acquisition for Habitat and Recreation

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**Total Project Budget:** \$ 1,307,000

**Proposed Project Time Period for the Funding Requested:** 3 years, July 2016 to June 2019

**Summary:**

Use the MMAPLE reverse-bid and conservation easement ranking system to protect 450-600 acres. Final test using ENRTF of MMAPLE's precision-conservation, market-based approach. Also, landowners pay MN Land Trust's stewardship costs.

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**Location**

**Region:** Central

**County Name:** Stearns

**City / Township:** Avon, Collegeville, & other Townships

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**Alternate Text for Visual:**

Avon Hills of Stearns County - 65,000 acres. Amazing open space and biological significance within 5 miles of St. Cloud and 60 miles of the Twin Cities.

_____ Funding Priorities	_____ Multiple Benefits	_____ Outcomes	_____ Knowledge Base
_____ Extent of Impact	_____ Innovation	_____ Scientific/Tech Basis	_____ Urgency
_____ Capacity Readiness	_____ Leverage	_____ TOTAL	_____ %



## Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF)

### 2016 Main Proposal

#### Project Title: Preserving the Avon Hills with Reverse-Bidding Easements – Final Phase

#### PROJECT TITLE: Preserving the Avon Hills with Reverse-Bidding Easements – Final Phase

### I. PROJECT STATEMENT

Use the MMAPLE reverse-bid and conservation easement ranking system to protect 450-600 acres of priority private lands. This will be the final test in the Avon Hills using ENRTF for MMAPLE's novel method. MMAPLE uses precision conservation and a market-based approach to assure the best easement value for the ENRTF. In a new tactic, landowners will pay the MN Land Trust's stewardship costs.

The Avon Hills area is a 65,000 acre unique natural landscape located in Stearns County just 15 miles west of St. Cloud. The landscape is glacial moraine that rises out of the surrounding farmland; it contains the highest concentration of native plant communities in the county, including oak and maple-basswood forests, tamarack and mixed-hardwood swamps, and wet meadows. It harbors rare species, including American ginseng, cerulean warbler, red-shouldered hawk, Blanding's turtle, and least darter. The area has been identified as *ecologically significant* by The Nature Conservancy's Eco-Regional Plan and the MN DNR's County Biological Survey. The USF&WS, the MN DNR and others have invested in protection efforts, signaling the priority for protection. The Avon Hills now has 1,400 acres of easements, most of which were established using the ENRTF.

Using ENRTF grants, the Avon Hills team developed and twice tested a novel ranking system for acquiring easements dubbed the Minnesota Multi-faceted Approach for Prioritizing Land Easements (MMAPLE). Under this system, each property is given an Environmental Benefits Score based on available data about its ecological qualities (e.g., shoreline, biodiversity, adjacency to protected properties). For properties meeting the minimum environmental threshold, MMAPLE uses a market-based approach that asks landowners to submit a sealed bid for the lowest price they will accept for a conservation easement. Those properties with the best ratio of environmental benefits to easement cost become the priority for acquisition. In the latest round of MMAPLE, the \$1,448 /acre average payment represents just 30% of the estimated market value of undeveloped land.

MMAPLE is being promoted as new approach for combining ecological and economic factors in a reasonably simple ranking system. Using lessons-learned to fine-tune followed by a final successful test will be proof that MMAPLE is a viable model for landowners, funders, and easement holders. MMAPLE emphasizes the best easement value for the ENRTF. Also, landowner payment of the easements' stewardship costs meets a goal of LCCMR and the State Auditor.

In addition, we intend to invest in community outreach and education to ensure that local decision makers, landowners, and others understand the importance of the Avon Hills landscape and the options that exist for its protection. Finally, we will ensure that the land eligible for conservation easements will be managed effectively by supporting the development of land management plans for targeted parcels.

### II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES

**Activity 1:** Complete 450-600 acres of Conservation Easements using MMAPLE Ranking and Reverse Bidding system. **Budget: \$ 1,279,000**

Help landowners permanently protect land through the use of conservation easements. Saint John's University (SJU) will partner with the Minnesota Land Trust (MLT). SJU will work with experts to "fine-tune" the MMAPLE system and then focus on landowner outreach, the reverse-bid process, and ranking using MMAPLE. MLT will use the ranked parcels to negotiate easements; prepare documents including easements and baseline reports; secure appraisals, title work, and mapping; and conduct long-term easement monitoring and enforcement.

The selection of the successful landowners follows the reverse-bid process, so specific parcels will be described and submitted to LCCMR after the bidding. Landowners with completed easements will receive a base payment



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**2016 Main Proposal**

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of \$30,000 plus their MMAPLE per acre bid. ENRTF funding will be used for landowner payments and MLT costs, except that none will be used for direct stewardship payments to MLT. Landowners must pay \$20,000 directly to MLT for long-term stewardship costs.

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
1. Pay landowners to protect 450-600 acres by completing 3-6 permanent conservation easements. Payments based on their MMAPLE ranking and reverse bidding plus a base payment of \$30,000 per landowner. (est. \$1,080,000)	June 30, 2019
2. Provide up to \$9/acre for land stewardship plans prepared by private sector natural resource professionals. (est. \$4,000 for stewardship plans.)	April 30, 2019
3. SJU and MLT will promote program, contact landowners, implement the MMAPLE reverse-bidding system, and complete all legal components of conservation easement projects, including assurance of long-term monitoring and enforcement. This will result in the expansion of existing protected areas and will protect working forests, ecological diversity, wildlife habitat, and water quality. (est. \$195,000 to SJU and MLT)	June 30, 2019

**Activity 2: Avon Hills Community Education and Outreach**

**Budget: \$ 28,000**

Facilitate communication among landowners, environmental groups, local units of government, and others within the Avon Hills community to promote land-use education, land protection, understanding of ecological principles, and land stewardship.

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
1. Increase awareness of the Avon Hills landscape by hosting annual conferences and/or other events to provide environmental education and promote community involvement. Assist Avon Hills Initiative Executive committee.	June 30, 2019

**III. PROJECT STRATEGY**

**A. Project Team/Partners**

Saint John’s Outdoor University: Tom Kroll, Kyle Rauch, Sarah Gainey, Jenny Kutter, Jeremy Scegur and staff

- Coordinating education and outreach, conferences, workshops, grant management, budgeting, meeting with landowners, managing bidding process for easements.

Minnesota Land Trust: Kris Larson, and staff

- Providing easement education, coordinating bidding process, meeting with landowners, developing easement documents, and monitoring and enforcing easements.

Avon Hills Initiative: local landowners, citizens, volunteers

- Working with Saint John’s Outdoor University and MN Land Trust to achieve project goals.

**B. Project Impact and Long-Term Strategy**

The past ENRTF supported phases (ML 2008-03d & ML 2013-04j) have opened up a new avenue of conservation easement prioritizing using MMAPLE and reverse-bidding. ENRTF funding of MMAPLE has allowed for innovation that is now being promoted statewide and even nationally. In addition to doing another 450-600 acres of great conservation work in the Avon Hills, we seek ENRTF funding for a final test for MMAPLE. A third successful use will firmly establish this cost-saving easement prioritization method as a potential tool for the common circumstances found in the Avon Hills and across the state. It will then be possible to seek funders from across the spectrum to continue the work in the Avon Hills. Our landscape goal is to permanently protect 70% of the remaining undeveloped landscape, or about 25,000 acres over the next 20 years.

**C. Timeline Requirements**

All elements of this proposal will be completed by June 30, 2019, and likely sooner for the easements.

## 2016 Detailed Project Budget

Project Title: Preserving the Avon Hills with Reverse-Bidding Easements – Final Phase

### IV. TOTAL ENRTF REQUEST BUDGET 3 years

BUDGET ITEM	AMOUNT
<b>Personnel (SJU):</b> Staff expenses include salaries plus 29% for eligible benefits. Staff will be involved for 3 years of grant activity. Estimated annual FTE below.	\$ 28,000
Tom Kroll - Project Manager & Forester, \$11,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits), 15% FTE.	
Jenny Kutter, Outdoor U Office Coord., \$3,500 (71% salary, 29% benefits) 10% FTE:	
Kyle Rauch, Outdoor U Educ. Staff, \$7,500 (71% salary, 29% benefits) 15% FTE	
Sarah Gainey, Outdoor U Educ. Staff, \$1,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits), 2% FTE:	
TBD, Other Outdoor U Educ Staff, \$1,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits) 1% FTE	
TBD, Temporary Easement Outreach, \$2,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits) 4% FTE	
Jeremy Scegur, SJU Accountant, \$2,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits) 4% FTE	
<b>Contracts (SJU):</b>	\$ 2,000
Conference speakers: speaker travel costs, honoraria, and fees for landowner educational conferences and workshops.	
<b>Equipment/Tools/Supplies (SJU):</b>	\$ 14,000
Promotion of conferences and workshops (newspaper ads, etc.), printing conference brochures and materials, participant supplies (folders, printed materials, etc.). Promotion of easements in media and mailings, etc, (est. \$12,000)	
Promotion of easements in media and mailings, etc. (est. \$ 2,000)	
<b>Personnel (MLT):</b> Staff expenses including salaries plus eligible benefits and related costs for approximately 33% FTE for each of the 3 years as follows:	\$ 90,000
Conservation directors or other land protection staff (approximately 23% FTE/yr)	
Legal staff and other support staff (approximately 10% FTE/yr)	
<b>Acquisition (Permanent Easements--MLT):</b> Includes purchase price of conservation easements (est. \$1,080,000). Other acquisition expenses, such as title work, insurance, etc.; GIS services; other (including appraisals, surveys, recording fees, etc.) to protect 450-600 acres of land through permanent conservation easements held by the Minnesota Land Trust. (est. \$84,000) Also includes up to \$9/acre for land stewardship plans prepared by private sector natural resource professionals. (est. \$4,000)	\$ 1,168,000
<b>Travel (MLT):</b> Mileage and related travel expenses in Minnesota. Estimated at 9,000 miles at the current IRS rate (\$0.555 per mile).	\$ 5,000
<b>TOTAL ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES TRUST FUND \$ REQUEST =</b>	<b>\$ 1,307,000</b>

### V. OTHER FUNDS

SOURCE OF FUNDS	AMOUNT	Status
<b>Other Non-State \$ Being Applied to Project During Project Period:</b> We anticipate a minimum landowner donation of 20% of the appraised easement values for the overall project. Actual amounts will depend upon the outcomes of the bidding process.	\$150,000 to \$500,000	Pending based on each bid
<b>Other State \$ Being Applied to Project During Project Period:</b>	N/A	N/A
<b>In-kind Services During Project Period (SJU):</b> Saint John's in-kind: overhead (computer, office space, phones, etc.); volunteer hours and mileage (conferences & landowner outreach)	\$ 11,000	
<b>Funding History:</b> ENRTF for ML 2008-03d Preserving the Avon Hills Landscape \$337,000 - ENRTF for ML 2013 -04j Preserving the Avon Hills Landscape - Phase II \$772,000 -	\$ 1,109,000	
<b>Remaining \$ From Current ENRTF Appropriation:</b> \$727,912 of this amount is directly tied to paying landowners for their easements and to MLT for completing the easements. The workplan listing the eligible landowners was approved on 20 April 2015. MLT is now procesing the landowners who will get the easements. We expect all four easements to be completed and the vast bulk of the funding spent by September 2015.	\$ 742,674	All funding will be spent by June 30, 2016.

**Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund  
2016 Proposed Acquisition/Restoration List**

**Project Title:** Preserving the Avon Hills with Reverse-Bidding Easements – Final Phase

**Project Manager Name:** Thomas Kroll

**Organization:** Saint John's University

**ENRTF \$ Request:** \$ 1,307,000

#	Acquisition or Restoration Parcel Name	Geographic Coordinates Format: [Deg.]° [Min.]' [Sec.]" [Hemis.]		Estimated Cost	County	Ecological Significance	Activity Description	# of Acres	# of Shoreline Miles	Type of Landowner	Proposed Fee Title or Easement Holder (if applicable)
		Latitude	Longitude								
1	See notes below.										
2											
3											
4											
5											
6											
7											
8											
9											
10											

**NOTES:** Due to the bidding method of MMAPLE, sites are currently unknown. Sites will be nominated by landowners and ranked using MMAPLE and then submitted to LCCMR for approval during the bidding process.

# Avon Hills of Stearns County - 65,000 acres

Amazing open space and biological significance within 5 miles of St. Cloud and 60 miles of the Twin Cities

