

**Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund  
2019 Request for Proposals (RFP)**

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**Project Title:**

**ENRTF ID: 257-G**

Preserving the Avon Hills with Reverse-Bidding Easements

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

**Sub-Category:**

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**Total Project Budget: \$** 2,410,500

**Proposed Project Time Period for the Funding Requested:** June 30, 2024 (5 yrs)

**Summary:**

Utilize proven cost-saving MMAPLE reverse-bid conservation easement ranking system to permanently protect 650 acres and restore/enhance 400 acres of priority private lands already protected in the Avon Hills.

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**Name:** John Geissler

**Sponsoring Organization:** Saint Johns University

**Title:** Land Manager/Outdoor University Director

**Department:** Outdoor University

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Collegeville MN 56321

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**Email** jgeissler001@csbsju.edu

**Web Address** www.csbsju.edu/outdooru

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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

<input type="checkbox"/>	Funding Priorities	<input type="checkbox"/>	Multiple Benefits	<input type="checkbox"/>	Outcomes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Knowledge Base
<input type="checkbox"/>	Extent of Impact	<input type="checkbox"/>	Innovation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Scientific/Tech Basis	<input type="checkbox"/>	Urgency
<input type="checkbox"/>	Capacity	<input type="checkbox"/>	Readiness	<input type="checkbox"/>	Leverage	<input type="checkbox"/>	TOTAL <input type="checkbox"/> %
<input type="checkbox"/>	If under \$200,000, waive presentation?						



## Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF)

### 2018 Main Proposal

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

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

##### I. PROJECT STATEMENT

Use the MMAPLE reverse-bid and conservation easement ranking system to protect 650 acres and restore/enhance 400 acres of priority private lands. MMAPLE's proven novel method uses precision conservation and a market-based approach to assure the best easement value for the ENRTF.

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. Our landscape goal is to permanently protect 70% of the remaining undeveloped landscape, or about 25,000 acres over the next 20 years. The USF&WS, the MN DNR and others have invested in protection efforts, signaling the priority for protection. With the assistance of the ENRTF and conservation minded landowners, 6,242 acres of the Avon Hills are protected (over 25% of our ambitious goal).

Using ENRTF grants, the Avon Hills team developed and have proven the effectiveness of this novel ranking system for acquiring easements dubbed the Minnesota Multi-faceted Approach for Prioritizing Land Easements (MMAPLE). In the latest round of MMAPLE, the \$2086 /acre average payment represents just 52% of the estimated market value of undeveloped land. MMAPLE emphasizes the best easement value for the ENRTF.

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 habitat management plans for targeted parcels and supporting enhancement/restoration work on existing easements.

##### II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES

**Activity 1:** Complete 650 acres of Conservation Easements using MMAPLE Ranking and Reverse Bidding system. **Budget: \$ 1,741,500**

Help landowners permanently protect land through the use of conservation easements. Saint John's University (SJU) will partner with Stearns County SWCD, and the Minnesota Land Trust (MLT). SJU will work with experts to "fine-tune" the MMAPLE system and together with SWCD will focus on landowner outreach, the reverse-bid process, and ranking using MMAPLE. MLT will use the ranked parcels to negotiate easements and potential restoration areas; 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 of \$30,000 plus their MMAPLE per acre bid.

Outcome	Completion Date
1. Pay landowners to protect ~650 acres by completing 3-8 permanent conservation easements. Payments based on their MMAPLE ranking and reverse bidding plus a base payment of \$30,000 per landowner. (est. \$1,200,000)	June 30, 2024
2. Provide habitat restoration management plans prepared by private sector natural resource professionals. (est. \$48,000)	April 30, 2024
3. SJU, Stearns County SWCD, 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	June 30, 2024



## Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF)

### 2018 Main Proposal

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

enforcement. This will result in the expansion of existing protected areas and will protect working forests, ecological diversity, wildlife habitat, and water quality.  
(est. \$493,500 to SJU, Stearns County SWCD, and MLT)

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

**Budget: \$ 32,500**

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.

Outcome	Completion Date
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, 2024

#### Activity 3: Easement Site Restoration & Enhancement on 400 acres

**Budget: \$636,500**

Based on property quality, restoration will be conducted to enhance water and habitat benefits on eased sites. The projects will reconnect fragmented habitat complexes by restoring native vegetation, and enhance existing natural habitat on eased lands through activities such as invasive species removal, prescribed burning, and oak regeneration. These habitat restoration and enhancement activities will benefit species of greatest conservation need such as; red-shouldered hawk, Blanding's turtle, and four-toed salamander and pollinators such as bumblebees and yellow swallowtail butterflies. Additional funding for restoration assistance on eased lands is concurrently being requested by this partnership from federal funding sources.

Outcome	Completion Date
1. Restoration/Enhancement projects selected and designed	June 2022
2. Restoration/Enhancement projects completed on 400 acres	June 2024

### III. PROJECT PARTNERS

#### A. Project Team/Partners

Saint John's Outdoor University: John Geissler, Kyle Rauch, Sarah Gainey, Jenny Kutter, Jeremy Scegura and staff

- Coordinating education and outreach, conferences, workshops, grant management, and budgeting

Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District: Nate Hylla, Jason Selvog

- Meeting and outreach with landowners, managing bidding process for easements.

Minnesota Land Trust: Nick Bancks, and staff

- Providing easement education, coordinating bidding process, meeting with landowners, developing easement documents, monitoring and enforcing easements, lead on restoration/enhancement effort.

Avon Hills Initiative: local landowners, citizens, volunteers

- Working with Saint John's, Stearns County SWCD, and MN Land Trust to achieve project goals.

### IV. Long-Term Implementation & Funding

The past ENRTF supported phases (ML 2008-03d, ML 2013-04j, ML 2016-09c) 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 650 acres of great conservation work in the Avon Hills, the funding will promote MMAPLE as a cost-saving easement prioritization method as a potential tool for the common circumstances found in the Avon Hills and across the state. We are 25% of the way to achieving our ambitious landscape goal to permanently protect 70% of the remaining undeveloped landscape, or about 25,000 acres over the next 20 years.

### V. Timeline Requirements

All elements of this proposal will be completed by June 30, 2024, and likely sooner for the easements.

## 2019 Proposal Budget Spreadsheet

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

**Project Length and Completion Date:** 5 Years, June 30, 2024

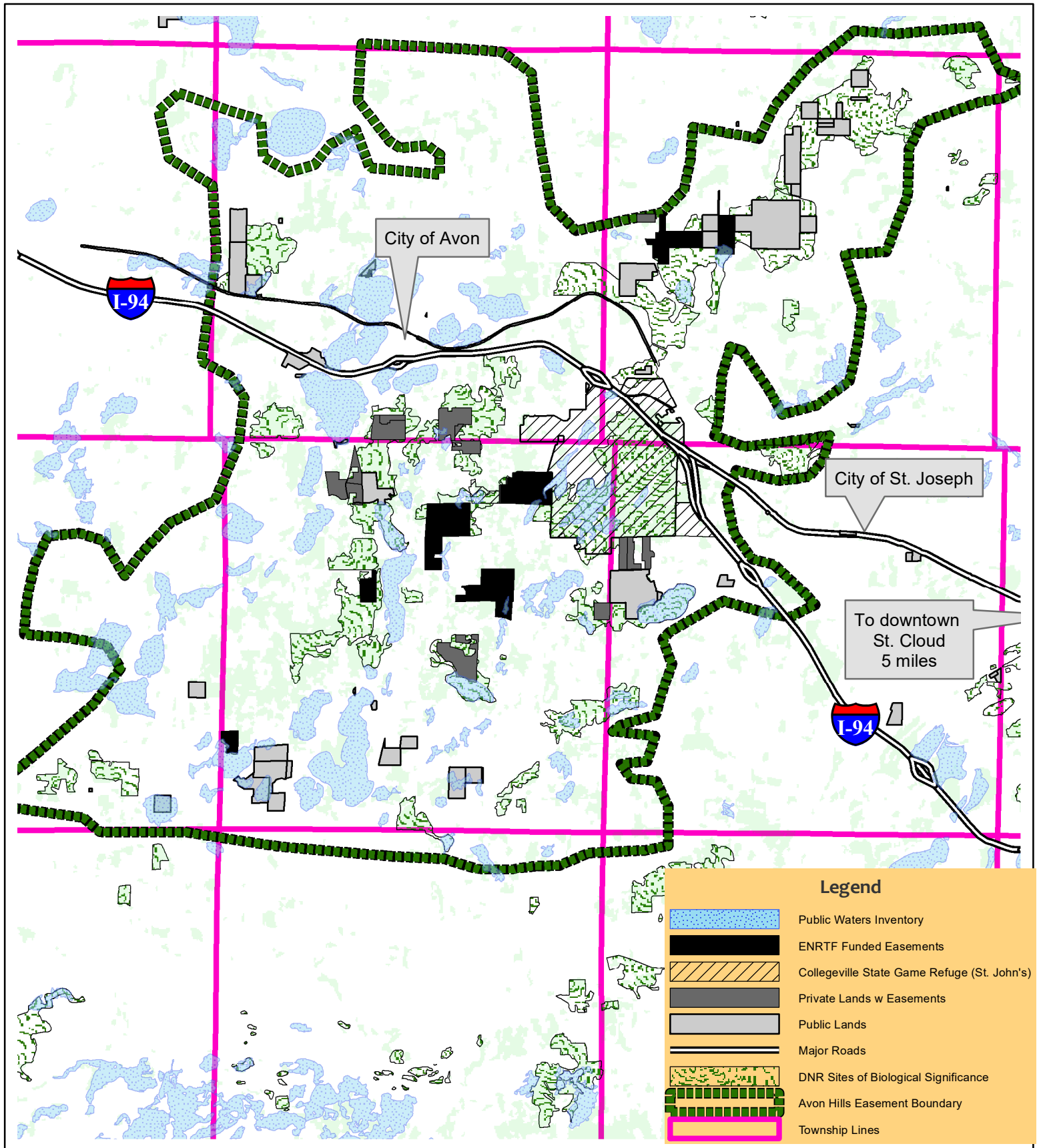
BUDGET ITEM	AMOUNT
<b>Personnel (Wages and Benefits) - SJU</b>	<b>\$25,500</b>
<i>John Geissler- Project Manager, \$10,500 (71% salary, 29% benefits), 2% FTE.</i>	\$10,500
<i>Jenny Kutter, Arboretum Office Coord., \$4,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits) 2% FTE:</i>	\$4,000
<i>Kyle Rauch, Arboretum Educ. Staff, \$5,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits) 2% FTE</i>	\$5,000
<i>Sarah Gainey, Arboretum Educ. Staff, \$1,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits), 0.5% FTE:</i>	\$1,000
<i>TBD, Arboretum Educ Staff, \$2,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits) 1% FTE</i>	\$2,000
<i>Jeremy Scegura, SJU Accountant, \$3,000 (71% salary, 29% benefits) 0.5% FTE</i>	\$3,000
<b>Professional/Technical/Service Contracts - SJU</b>	<b>\$27,000</b>
<i>Conference speakers: speaker fees and honoraria for landowner educational conferences and workshops.</i>	\$2,000
<i>Professional Services subcontract from to Stearns County SWCD for general outreach, personal landowner contacts, site evaluation and mapping, scoring using MMAPLE, assisting with the bidding process, and assisting with the bid ranking.</i>	\$25,000
<b>Equipment/Tools/Supplies - SJU</b>	<b>\$14,000</b>
<i>Promotion of easements, conferences, &amp; workshops (newspaper ads, etc.), printing conference brochures and materials, participant supplies (folders, printed info, etc.).</i>	\$14,000
<b>Professional/Technical/Service Contracts-SJU to MLT</b>	<b>\$2,344,000</b>
<i>Easement Acquisition: Includes purchase price of conservation easements to protect about 650 acres of land through permanent conservation easements held by the Minnesota Land Trust. Includes long-term stewardship costs of \$192,000 (\$24,000 per easement for 8 projects), habitat management plan contracts of \$48,000 (8 projects @ \$6,000 per plan). MMAPLE will be used to rank the proposed parcels.</i>	\$1,440,000
<i>Easement Restoration/Enhancement: Includes restoration and enhancement costs on 400 acres of Avon Hills easement land through contracts with USFWS, MN DNR, NPOs and private restoration firms (e.g. Great River Greening, area forestry consultants)</i>	\$560,000
<i>Personnel (Wages and Benefits) - MLT: Staff expenses including salaries plus eligible benefits and related costs for approximately 55% FTE for each of the 3 years as follows: Conservation directors or other land protection/restoration staff (approximately 40% FTE/yr), legal staff and other support staff (approximately 15% FTE/yr)</i>	\$154,000
<i>Professional Services for Acquisition: Includes appraisal costs of \$70,000 @\$7,000 each and \$50,000 for surveys @\$5,000 each for 10 easements, title review and closing costs of \$30,000 @\$3,000 each, mineral reports for 2 projects @ \$2,500 each, and mapping costs of \$10,000 @\$1,000 each for 3-10 easements.</i>	\$165,000
<i>Professional Services for Restoration: Includes mapping costs of \$5,000 to build geodatabase and track projects and \$10,000 for restoration site plans @\$2,500 each for 4 easements without action plans.</i>	\$15,000
<i>Travel expenses in Minnesota - MLT: Mileage and related travel expenses in Minnesota. Estimated at 4,800 miles at the current IRS rate (\$0.545 per mile).</i>	\$10,000
<b>TOTAL ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATURAL RESOURCES TRUST FUND \$ REQUEST=</b>	<b>\$2,410,500</b>

**V. OTHER FUNDS** (This entire section must be filled out. Do not delete rows. Indicate "N/A" if row is not applicable.)

SOURCE OF FUNDS	AMOUNT	Status
<b>Other Non-State \$ To Be 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 on the outcomes of the bidding process.	\$150,000 - \$500,000	Pending based on each bid
<b>Other State \$ To Be Applied To Project During Project Period:</b>	N/A	
<b>In-kind Services To Be Applied To Project During Project Period:</b> Saint John's in-kind: overhead (computer, office space, phones, etc.); volunteer hours and mileage (conferences and landowner outreach)	\$11,000	
<b>Past and Current ENRTF Appropriation:</b> \$337,000 - ENRTF for ML 2008-03d Preserving the Avon Hills Landscape; \$772,000 - ENRTF for ML 2013-04j Preserving the Avon Hills Landscape - Phase II ; \$1,300,000 - ENRTF for ML 2016-09c Conservation Easements in Avon Hills - Phase III - Remaining unspent funds are directly tied to paying landowners for their easements and to MLT for completing the easements. The workplan listing the eligible landowners was approved on 16 April 2018. MLT is now procesing the landowners who will get the easements.	\$2,409,000	All funding will from phase III will be spent by June 30, 2019
<b>Other Funding History</b>	N/A	

# 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



## Organization Description and Project Manager Qualifications

### Organization Description

Saint John's Abbey Arboretum encompasses the grounds of Saint John's University and Saint John's Abbey and was designated as a natural arboretum in 1997. Our 2,700 acres of forests, prairies, and lakes are managed with the goal of preserving and restoring the native flora and fauna of central Minnesota, as well as offering opportunities for education and research.

Saint John's Outdoor University is a unit of Saint John's University that provides environmental education programming. Saint John's University has a 501 (c)(3) designation.

### Project Manager Qualifications: John Geissler

Work Experience	<u>Abbey Arboretum Land Manager/Outdoor University Director</u>
2017-present	Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN Care for 2,700 acres of forest, lakes, wetlands, and prairies. Manage land base for habitat, recreation, timber, clean water, and educational/interpretive opportunities. Maintain "well-managed" rating from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) for all forest management activities, supervise four staff and budget for the department. Direct staff in annually providing environmental education field experiences for 8,000 K-12 students, provide field trips and outdoor experiences for 5,000 college students, plus workshops, conferences and field tours for 5,000 landowners, professionals, and families.
2007-2017	<u>Boulder Lake Environmental Learning Center Director</u> University of Minnesota Duluth, Duluth, MN
2000-2004	<u>Assistant Outdoor University Director</u> Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN
Related Professional Activity	Duluth News Tribune 20 under 40 award (2016) Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation Touchstone Award Finalist (2016) Saint John's Outdoor University Advisory Council (2012-Present) Minnesota Master Naturalist Volunteer Instructor (2009-Present) / Woodland Advisor Instructor (2007-Present) University of Minnesota Leadership Education and Development Advisory Academy (2010-2011) Minnesota Association for Environmental Education Board of Directors (2007-2011)
Education	M.S. Forestry: Forest Biology, Ecology, Conservation, and Management - 2018 University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN  M.E.Ed.: Environmental Education - 2007 University Of Minnesota Duluth, Duluth, MN  BA: Chemistry - 1999 Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN