**PROJECT TITLE:** **Private Native Prairie Conservation through Native Prairie Bank**

**I. PROJECT STATEMENT**

Established in 1987 through Minnesota Statute 84.96, Native Prairie Bank (NPB) has a proven track record of working with landowners to enhance and protect remnant native prairie while leaving the land in private ownership. Through this proposal, prairie technical assistance will be provided to landowners, practitioners, youth and the general public. Native prairie restoration and enhancement activities will be implemented on about 770 acres of NPBs. Permanent protection of about 150 acres will take place through the acquisition of NPB conservation easements with priority given to high quality prairie identified by the Minnesota Biological Survey (MBS). Native prairie is a fragile, unique natural ecosystem that consists of thousands of different organisms, plants, animals, bacteria and soil fungi. Their complex interactions provide the food, water and shelter required by many of Minnesota’s rare, threatened and endangered species. Native prairie provides a multitude of benefits to the citizens of the state, such as water filtration and recharge, pollinator and wildlife habitat, soil health, erosion control, outdoor recreation, etc. Threats to native prairie are widespread including cropland conversion, mining, development, invasive species, woody encroachment and non-prairie focused land use/management. Based on the most recent statistics compiled for the 5-year update of the MN Prairie Conservation Plan, MBS has identified about 249,000 acres of remaining native prairie in Minnesota including approximately 115,000 acres that has no formal protection.

**II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Activity 1:****Prairie Landowner Assistance, Outreach and Existing NPB Stewardship**  Private landowners and other practitioners will increase their stewardship of native prairie as a result of this project’s workshops, field days, one-on-one technical assistance, online resource development, etc. The Prairie Landowner Network established through the ML18 appropriation in cooperation with Conservation Corps of Minnesota (CCM) will continue to use innovative ways to connect prairie landowners through social media, email, newsletters, training opportunities, etc. This network is aimed at improving prairie quality on private lands by keeping landowners up-to-date on the best management strategies. At least 20 landowners will receive a comprehensive prairie stewardship plan that will provide specific prairie management expertise for their property. Landowner enrollment in Native Prairie Tax Exemption will be increased to conserve and improve management of native prairie which may not be protected through other means. About 5 baseline property reports and 30 monitoring visits will be completed on existing NPBs to evaluate current conditions and insure easement compliance.  **ENRTF BUDGET: $523,669** |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Completion Date** |
| 1a. ~10 workshops/field days for prairie landowners & practitioners (~700 people) | 06/30/2023 |
| 1b. consultations, guidance, mgmt. asst., etc. to ~80 landowners | 06/30/2023 |
| 1c. ~50 prairie stewards participating in the Prairie Landowner Network | 06/30/2023 |
| 1d. ~20 prairie stewardship plans provided to prairie landowners (~1400 acres) | 06/30/2023 |
| 1e. ~5 baseline property reports for NPB easements | 06/30/2023 |
| 1f. monitoring and stewardship of ~ 30 NPB easements | 06/30/2023 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Activity 2:** **770 Acres of****Native Prairie Habitat Enhancement & Restoration**  Restoration and enhancement activities will be completed on about 770 acres. Activities include seed collection, site preparation, planting, invasive species prevention and control, woody species removal, boundary signing, site cleanup, prescribed burns (or alternative prescribed disturbance, such as haying, mowing or grazing, where appropriate) and monitoring. All restorations will use seeds/plants of local ecotypes, collected from onsite or within 30 miles. Ecological Monitoring will occur at 40 NPB sites to collect ecological data in order to evaluate whether the objectives of management were met, to analyze ecological changes over time and to contribute to future management decisions. Restoration and enhancement activities will be carried out via landowner agreements, DNR staff, CCM, volunteers, and/or contractors.  **ENRTF BUDGET: $1,013,673** |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Completion Date** |
| 2a. ~20 acres of prairie reconstruction (restoration) | 06/30/2023 |
| 2b. ~250 acres of woody removal & invasive species treatment | 06/30/2023 |
| 2c. ~ 500 acres of prescribed burns | 06/30/2023 |
| 2d. NPB easement boundary signs & development work on ~4 NPB sites | 06/30/2023 |
| 2e. Ecological monitoring on ~40 NPB sites | 06/30/2023 |
| **Activity 3:****Acquisition and Stewardship of 150 acres of Native Prairie Bank Easements**  DNR-administered permanent NPB conservation easements will be acquired on about 150 acres of high quality native prairie, which will include no more than 30% non-prairie as necessary to improve prairie management. Payment rates are determined by authorizing law, M.S. 84.96, as applied according to policies of the Department of Natural Resources and the Board of Water and Soils Resources. Conservation easement baseline reports will be completed on all approximately 4 NPBs acquired. Priority sites are identified by MBS which target rare and endangered plant and animal species, high quality plant communities, key habitats for Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and parcels within larger habitat complexes to reduce impacts from habitat fragmentation. If needed, restoration will be completed using a combination of funds from Activity 2 above and/or other state appropriations. Only about 10 of the 150 acres acquired are expected to need restoration. Funding will be deposited into a conservation easement stewardship account dedicated to perpetual monitoring and enforcement on NPB easements acquired with this proposal.  **ENRTF BUDGET: $742,659** | |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Completion Date** |
| 3a. acquisition of about 150 acres NPB conservation easements | 6/30/2023 |
| 3b. ~4 baseline property reports for NPB easements | 6/30/2023 |
| 3c. dollars deposited into conservation easement stewardship account (~4 easements) | 6/30/2023 |

**III. PROJECT PARTNERS:**

Landowner outreach will be coordinated with Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan partners and Local Technical Teams. The teams of staff from SWCD's, NRCS, DNR, USFWS, TNC, Pheasants Forever, etc., cultivate relationships with prairie landowners and bring new potential NPB parcels to DNR prairie staff for further evaluation. This appropriation will not be used to fund activities of partners.

**IV. LONG-TERM- IMPLEMENTATION AND FUNDING:**

Currently, DNR holds 12,600 acres of NPB easements, which accounts for 40% of the MBS mapped native prairie protected through conservation easements statewide. If NPB aimed to protect 40% of the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan native prairie easement protection goals, NPB would need to acquire an additional 44,000 acres. At the same time, without active natural resource management prairie values will be lost. Thus Native Prairie Bank could utilize ENRTF support of about $5M per year to sustain and protect native prairie.

**V. SEE ADDITIONAL PROPOSAL COMPONENTS:**

**A. Project Budget Spreadsheet, B. Map, C. Parcel List Spreadsheet, D. Acquisition, Easements, and Restoration Requirements, E. Project Manager Qualifications and Organization Description**