**PROJECT TITLE: Purchasing 316 acres for Conservation and Agriculture Education**

**I. PROJECT STATEMENT**

The Food Group seeks funding to acquire 316 acres of farmland and diverse natural habitat in the Wilder Forest in May Township, Washington County. We wish to purchase this land to preserve it from development and sustain and expand our organic farmer education program and incubator farm, which serves farmers who are immigrants, refugees, and people of color. The acquisition of this land would have significant conservation benefits to wildlife, people, and water quality through protecting this land from development and expanding organic agriculture and conservation practices. This site serves a sustainable agriculture education center, so the benefit of the conservation practices implemented on this farm will be replicated throughout Minnesota.

The Food Group is part of a group of interested parties who are coming together to purchase the entire Wilder Forest property – approximately 600 acres. This property is one of the most significant tracts of land held in single ownership in the Twin Cities Metro Area. It includes~400 acres of high-quality, undisturbed forest and wetland that provide habitat for up to 70 Species in Greatest Conservation Need, and 3.7 miles of shore land along Mays, Clear, East Boot, and Square Lakes, some of the most pristine in Minnesota. The property also includes 186 acres of prime agricultural land, 80 acres of which is certified organic. The property lies adjacent to the 802-acre Warner Nature Center and its significant ecological resources. Three organizations occupying these properties offer programming to Metro residents: Warner Nature Center, River Grove Charter School, and The Food Group.

The Amherst Wilder Foundation has recently expressed interest in divesting of this property. They wish to sell the entire property as a package. The uncertainty surrounding the long-term disposition of the Wilder property, precipitated the formation of the group of parties seeking to purchase this land to protect it from development, which includes Washington County, The Food Group, and The Minnesota Land Trust.

Protection of this land will provide multiple conservation benefits to the public including preservation of critical wildlife habitat and farmland, protection of nearby water sources through organic agriculture, and pollinator-friendly land management practices. This unique and diverse habitat is located at the intersection of Carnelian Creek and Tanglewood Conservation Corridors, and includes land listed within one of Washington County’s top-10 priorities for conservation. This acquisition ensures protection of this unique property.

As part of this coalition, Food Group wishes to purchase and manage 316 acres of the Wilder Forest property. This include 150 acres (~80 tillable) currently leased from the Wilder Foundation on which we operate Big River Farms –a certified organic educational and incubator farm for beginning farmers from diverse backgrounds. We also plan to purchase an additional 166 (106 tillable) acres, currently farmed conventionally in row crops, to expand our sustainable agricultural programming. We would transition this additional acreage into organic production providing benefits to pollinators and wildlife. We anticipate in the first three years following acquisition working with 150 farmers, 1,500 K-12 students and bringing in 1,000 community members through two annual farm events, field days focused on organic farming and conservation practices, and plentiful volunteer opportunities.

Washington County has expressed interest in securing a conservation easement on the property we seek to purchase, funded through its Land and Water Legacy program. This easement would cover both tillable acres, where we would practice only organic and sustainable agriculture practices, and non-tillable acres. The non-tillable acres are primarily undisturbed prairie and forest, which would be maintained for wildlife habitat.

**II. PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Activity 1:** Acquisition and protection of 316 acres of agriculture and forest land.  Secure fee acquisition of target property from Wilder Foundation coupled with permanent protection of the property through a conservation easement with Washington County. The easement will ensure permanent protection of the property in line with the terms of the easement. Responsibilities for long-term monitoring and enforcement will be held by Washington County.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Outcome** | **Completion Date** | | 1. Long-termprotection of property through fee title acquisition by The Food Group | December 2020 | | 2. Acquisition of conservation easement by Washington County | September 2020 | | 3. Expanded programming in organic agriculture education and production for and by people of color and immigrant populations. | May 2021 |   **ENRTF BUDGET: $1,500,000**  Washington County is interested in providing $1,230,000 toward the purchase of a conservation easement using funds from its Land and Water Legacy Program. The remaining fee value of the property after the placement of a conservation easement is estimated at $1,500,000 the amount requested in this proposal. |  |

**III. PROJECT PARTNERS:**

**A. Partners receiving ENRTF funding: N/A**

**B. Partners NOT receiving ENRTF funding**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Title** | **Affiliation** | **Role** |
| **June Mathiowetz** | **Senior Planner** | **Washington County** | **Facilitating funding request of approximately $1,230,000 for conservation easements from Washington County** |

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

The Food Group will provide the human resources and expertise necessary to manage the 316 acres of farmland and forest for maximum conservation benefit. This will include the current Big River Farms program staff, 4 full-time employees and 3 part-time employees, who have significant expertise organic agriculture and sustainable land management practices. Additional staff/consultants with expertise in forestry and land management will be hired as needed. Staff will remove invasive species to protect biological diversity on forested land and implement sustainable farming practices on tillable acreage including: organic vegetable production, cover crops, and installation of pollinator habitat. The Food Group will cover the ongoing costs of land management through its steady and diverse mix of income sources including: 55%-Earned income; 14%-Corporate and foundation support;13%-Individual donors; 13%- Government contracts and grants; 3%- Annual Hunger Bash event; 2%- United Way.

**V. TIME LINE REQUIREMENTS:**

The Food Group has requested financial and technical support from Washington County. Upon completion of an appraisal, The Food Group will be part of a team to negotiate a purchase agreement with Wilder Foundation. Once acquisition is complete, The Food Group will lead a process to develop utilization plans for the additional acres including community members and farming/forestry experts.

**VI. SEE ADDITIONAL PROPOSAL COMPONENTS:**

**A. Proposal Budget Spreadsheet E. Board Resolution**

**B. Visual Component or Map F. 990/Tax Information**

**C. Parcel List G. Project Manager and Organizational Overview**

**D. Additional Information**