



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2024 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2024-059

Proposal Title: Mentoring Next Generation of Conservation Professionals Phase 2

Project Manager Information

Name: Deborah Loon

Organization: Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Trust Inc

Office Telephone: (612) 801-1935

Email: dloon@mnvalleytrust.org

Project Basic Information

Project Summary: Internships and apprenticeships on the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge will introduce 37 diverse young people to careers in the conservation field.

Funds Requested: \$793,000

Proposed Project Completion: August 31, 2026

LCCMR Funding Category: Environmental Education (C)

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

Narrative

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

The conservation field generally is not considered accessible to young people of color. Barriers include limited access to nature and nature-based recreation, lack of mentorship and awareness of opportunities, and financial inability to pursue experiences, education and training that open doors to conservation careers.

Recently, the Minnesota Valley Trust and Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) teamed up to build a model internship and apprenticeship program with a focus on local recruitment of diverse high-school youth and emerging professionals. "Mentoring the Next Generation of Conservation Professionals" offers first-hand participation in educational, stewardship and outdoor recreation experiences both on and off the Refuge. Given its location and varied habitats, the Refuge can serve as a learning laboratory for future conservationists and environmental educators.

This internship and apprenticeship program launched in 2021 with an initial grant from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, along with funding from the USFWS and MN Valley Trust. Given the program success and our learnings in these initial years, we seek to continue and strengthen the program. A phase 2 grant will introduce many more high school students, college students and recent college graduates from a diversity of backgrounds to the conservation field.

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.

As one of just 14 urban wildlife refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) works to encourage a diversity of youth to consider conservation careers and ensure a future constituency passionate about protecting public lands.

Historically, internships paid no or very low stipends. With rising costs of a college education and intransigent economic disparities, many students cannot afford unpaid internships. They often must take jobs outside their chosen field to fund college or even afford their lives. Without good internships, they do not gain experience and connections needed to compete for quality jobs.

The ENRTF grant will fund 12 full-time, paid internships and apprenticeships on the Refuge (16 FTEs over 2 years). The interns and apprentices will work alongside and be mentored by USFWS professionals to design and deliver environmental education, co-lead wildlife interpretive and nature-based activities, conduct habitat restoration and biological surveys, develop and maintain visitor use amenities, and explore conservation-related careers. They will experience outdoor activities like fishing, paddling, orienteering, birding and hunting, many for the first time.

The Minnesota Valley Trust and USFWS will fully-fund the Refuge Internship Coordinator, Lead Environmental Education Intern and DUCKS High School Internship program.

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?

This program will introduce 37 young people to the conservation field. We will build a diverse pool of conservationists who will contribute long-term to protecting, restoring and enhancing Minnesota's natural resources. They will learn about the natural world and why conservation is important, explore conservation careers, and build the skills needed to compete for post-secondary education and employment opportunities. They will provide over 40,000 hours of service, improve the habitat conditions of over 1,000 acres of prairie, wetland and forest, and introduce thousands of children to the wonders of the natural world through environmental education and nature-based activities.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: 4 Full-Time Apprentices will work alongside USFWS personnel and gain hands-on experience in Conservation Biology, Visitor Services and Community Outreach

Activity Budget: \$407,000

Activity Description:

Four recent college graduates from a diversity of backgrounds will have full-time paid apprenticeships with the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District (Refuge) for 2 years each. They will work with and be mentored by USFWS professionals. Two Conservation Biology Apprentices will participate in biological monitoring, habitat restoration and enhancement, visitor engagement, and Refuge operations. Two Visitor Services and Outreach Apprentices will develop and facilitate programming that engages urban and suburban youth and families on the Refuge and in the community, develop a framework for and deliver strategic communications for the Refuge, and foster community partnerships to serve the Refuge's urban audiences. The apprentices will be employees of the Minnesota Valley Trust but integrated fully into the Refuge team. They will be paid a wage comparable to an entry-level position on the federal GS scale for this market (estimated at \$18.45-\$21.63 / hour), provided a full range of benefits and covered by workers compensation. Their development and training plan will be designed to enable them to successfully compete for a federal GS-7 level position upon completion of their apprenticeship. In addition, a Public Lands Corp certificate will provide preferential status in the federal hiring process.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
4 Apprentices complete 12 months	June 30, 2025
4 Apprentices complete 24 months	June 30, 2026

Activity 2: 8 Full-Time Environmental Education Interns will build their teaching skills and engage thousands of students and families

Activity Budget: \$386,000

Activity Description:

Eight recent college graduates will have one-year paid Environmental Education Teaching Internships on the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (4 interns each year). They will learn from and be mentored by USFWS professionals, design and deliver quality environmental educational programs to over 6,000 children, teachers and families who visit the Refuge from schools throughout the Twin Cities metro area, and lead interpretive programs for the public on the Refuge. The interns will be employees of the Minnesota Valley Trust but integrated fully into the Refuge team. They will be paid a wage comparable to an entry-level position on the federal GS scale for this market (estimated at \$18.45-\$19.45/hour), provided a full range of benefits and covered by workers compensation. Their development and training plan will be designed to enable them to successfully compete for a federal GS-5 level position upon completion of their apprenticeship. In addition, a Public Lands Corp certificate will provide preferential status in the federal hiring process.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
4 Environmental Education Teaching Interns complete year 1	August 31, 2025
4 Environmental Education Teaching Interns complete year 2	August 31, 2026

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Eric Mruz	Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge & Wetland Management District	Supervise, support and engage the interns and apprentices as they design and deliver environmental education programs, plan and co-lead wildlife interpretive and nature-based activities, assist USFWS personnel with habitat restoration and enhancement projects, conduct biological surveys, improve visitor facilities, and explore conservation-related career options.	No

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 Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Trust and Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge are committed to maintaining this robust internship and apprenticeship program for the long-term. Future funding will be sought through philanthropic efforts with foundations, corporations, civic organizations and individuals by the Trust and Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends, as well as through other state and federal sources of funds.

Other ENRTF Appropriations Awarded in the Last Six Years

Name	Appropriation	Amount Awarded
Metro Conservation Corridors Phase VIII - Priority Expansion of Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge	M.L. 2015, Chp. 76, Sec. 2, Subd. 09g	\$500,000
Mentoring the Next Generation of Conservation Professionals	M.L. 2021, First Special Session, Chp. 6, Art. 5, Sec. 2, Subd. 05d	\$500,000

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Deborah Loon

Job Title: Executive Director

Provide description of the project manager's qualifications to manage the proposed project.

Deborah Loon has served as the executive director of the Minnesota Valley Trust almost since its inception in 2001. In that role, she is the liaison with the USFWS and is the primary contact with all partners, landowners, local communities and grantmaking organizations. She provides support to the Trust Board of Directors, implements the Strategic Framework and provides overall management of the organization, including grants management. Loon brings extensive experience in project management and organizational leadership for both nonprofit and for-profit organizations. She has served on the staff and boards of directors for numerous nonprofit organizations since 1984, including in the executive director role since 1999. Loon holds a BA in political science from St. Olaf College.

Organization: Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Trust Inc

Organization Description:

The Minnesota Valley Trust, Inc. is a 501c3 nonprofit corporation that assists the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in making the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District a premier urban wildlife refuge that:

- Protects, restores, and enhances large blocks and corridors of habitat to provide sustainable landscapes for people and wildlife and improve water quality in the Minnesota River
- Provides opportunities for Twin Cities residents to access the Refuge and connect with wildlife, plants and the Minnesota River in a diversity of ways meaningful to them
- Increases connections with a diversity of residents in the Twin Cities through outreach programming that meets residents of all ages and backgrounds in their communities, introduces them to the natural world and draws them to visit and experience the Refuge themselves
- Engages a diversity of people as volunteers, interns and employees to improve Refuge habitat, meet Refuge educational objectives and build a conservation ethic throughout the community
- Introduces children to the wonders of the natural outdoors through educational and interpretive programming, thereby building a pool of future conservationists, employees, volunteers, advocates and philanthropists.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
Apprentices in Conservation Biology, Visitor Services and Outreach		4 Apprentices from a diversity of backgrounds will work alongside and learn from USFWS professionals for 2 years in the fields of conservation biology, visitor services and outreach.			18%	8		\$407,000
Environmental Education Teaching Interns		4 Interns from a diversity of backgrounds will work each year (8 interns total over 2 years) with the Refuge Environmental Education team to design and deliver environmental education programming to 6,000 students, teachers and parents each year, as well as interpretive programming to the public.			18%	8		\$386,000
							Sub Total	\$793,000
Contracts and Services								
							Sub Total	-
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
							Sub Total	-
Capital Expenditures								
							Sub Total	-
Acquisitions and Stewardship								
							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-

Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-
Printing and Publication								
							Sub Total	-
Other Expenses								
							Sub Total	-
							Grand Total	\$793,000

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

Category/Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request
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Non ENRTF Funds

Category	Specific Source	Use	Status	Amount
State				
			State Sub Total	-
Non-State				
Cash	Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Trust, Inc.	<p>The Minnesota Valley Trust will fund (a) 100% of the Lead Environmental Education Intern position and (b) 25% of the total employment cost of the Internship Coordinator (USFWS will fund the other 75%).</p> <p>* (a) The Lead Environmental Education Intern position will be filled by one of the EE Interns from the previous year. Their employment will be extended an additional year to provide guidance and mentorship to the new cohort of 4 Environmental Education Interns. The EE Lead will be an employee of the Minnesota Valley Trust but integrated fully into the Refuge team. They will be paid a wage comparable to a GS-5 level position on the federal GS scale for this market (estimated at \$20.64-\$21.63/hour), provided a full range of benefits and covered by workers compensation. Their development and training plan will be designed to enable them to successfully compete for a federal GS-7 level position upon completion of this second year of their internship. This position will be funded 100% by the Minnesota Valley Trust.</p> <p>* (b) The full-time Internship Coordinator will ensure all interns and apprentices have a robust work and learn experience. The Internship Coordinator will plan and lead all activities of the high school interns on the DUCKS Team (see below), assist all Refuge programs in recruiting a diverse set of intern and apprentice candidates, coordinate the onboarding and training of interns and apprentices, ensure a high level of collaboration across all Refuge program areas in intern projects and activities, and increase the Refuge's connections with and support of local partner organizations, especially those engaging and supporting under-represented communities. This position is funded 75% by USFWS and 25% by MN Valley Trust.</p>	Secured	\$151,000
In-Kind	US Fish & Wildlife Service, Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge & Wetland Management District	The Refuge will provide office space, equipment, local travel and supplies for all interns and apprentices. The value of supervision and mentoring of the interns and apprentices by MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District staff is not included in the in-kind estimate.	Secured	\$60,000

Cash	US Fish and Wildlife Service, Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District	<p>USFWS will fund (a) 100% of the DUCKS Team high school internship program and (b) 75% of the Internship Coordinator position.</p> <p>* (a) The DUCKS Team high school internship program engages 24 high school students (12 students ages 14-18 each year) from under-represented communities in the Twin Cities through paid internships (\$14-\$15/hour) on the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). Interns in the DUCKS (Discovery, Unity, Conservation, Knowledge, Service) program will gain exposure and entry-level career experience in the conservation field. Built upon the "Work, Learn, Play" model, interns will be guided by our full-time Internship Coordinator and work alongside Refuge staff during a school year (1 session/month, October – May) and 9-week summer session (full time, June - August). DUCKS interns will be recruited and employed by American Conservation Experience. Interns will participate in introductory outdoor recreational activities that explore public lands and develop a connection to the Refuge. Working with USFWS staff, interns will develop career readiness skills, learn about conservation career pathways, and support restoration and community engagement activities, both on the Refuge and in the community. Interns will actively contribute to the Refuge's conservation mission and increase opportunities for the public to connect with the Refuge and engage in nature-based activities. 100% of program costs, including intern wages and all program expenses, are funded by the USFWS.</p> <p>* (b) USFWS also will fund 75% of the Internship Coordinator position at the Trust (see above description).</p>	Secured	\$420,000
			Non State Sub Total	\$631,000
			Funds Total	\$631,000

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [1a0aef3f-e92.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

The attachment is a map showing the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District boundaries and units....

Financial Capacity

File: [7cff6640-81d.pdf](#)

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
MN Valley Trust Board Resolution	b84d6962-efd.pdf

Optional Attachments

Support Letter, Photos, Media, Other

Title	File
DUCKS High School Internship Program 2022 Report	a464def2-7f8.pdf
DUCKS Magazine	4084cab5-a96.pdf
MN Valley Trust Webpage re Internships and Apprenticeships	852f6f33-9d1.pdf

Administrative Use

Does your project include restoration or acquisition of land rights?

No

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

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 design, construction, or renovation of a building, trail, campground, or other capital asset costing \$10,000 or more?

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?

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