



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2026 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2026-002

Proposal Title: CMSM 2026 Proposal

Project Manager Information

Name: Crystal Olson

Organization: Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota

Office Telephone: (507) 344-9107

Email: crystal.olson@cmsouthernmn.org

Project Basic Information

Project Summary: The Coalition will work collaboratively to share, expand upon, and standardize existing curriculum of nature-based programming to engage children birth-10, fostering environmental stewardship, awareness of natural resources, and sustainability.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$300,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2028

LCCMR Funding Category: Small Projects (G)

Secondary Category: Education and Outdoor Recreation (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.

Children today have fewer opportunities to engage with nature due to increased screen time, urbanization, and limited access to outdoor environments. This disconnect from nature hinders their understanding of the environment, natural resources, and sustainability, which are critical for fostering lifelong environmental stewardship. Early exposure to nature-based learning is vital for cultivating curiosity, empathy, and responsibility toward the natural world, yet many children, particularly in underserved communities, lack access to these experiences.

Environmental education is not equally accessible to all children in Minnesota. Limited resources and lack of nature-based learning opportunities prevent many children from developing strong connections to the environment. This disparity hinders their understanding of natural resources, conservation, and sustainability, essential knowledge for fostering lifelong environmental stewardship. Additionally, some children and families encounter barriers such as financial limitations, language barriers, cultural differences, or lack of accommodations for special needs, further limiting access to high quality environmental education.

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.

The Greater Minnesota Children's Museum Coalition recognizes this gap and the need for accessible, high-quality environmental education tailored to children ages birth-10. By leveraging the collective expertise, resources, and existing curriculum of member museums across the state, the Coalition seeks to standardize curriculum that will be shared and introduces young learners to the wonders of nature. To ensure equity, Coalition members already have access initiatives, such as free/reduced memberships, in place that support those experiencing barriers, ensuring all children can access these environmental programs.

This initiative expands upon the coalition's existing environmental programs, enhancing them with interactive, age-appropriate content that aligns with Minnesota State Science Standards. It will engage children in learning about ecosystems, conservation, and the importance of protecting natural resources. As a foundation for this effort, the Coalition has compiled an inventory of 20 pre-existing nature-based programs at its disposal (see supplemental attachments).

Environmental learning begins in early childhood, inspiring the next generation to value and care for the environment. Structured programs, paired with books, expert discussions, and hands-on exploration, enhance environmental literacy in youth. This project strengthens environmental education by uniting expertise and resources throughout Minnesota, ensuring a broader statewide impact.

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?

The way children play today shapes the adults they become, influencing their appreciation for nature and their role in environmental stewardship and conservation. The project will foster environmental stewardship by educating children ages birth-10 about Minnesota's ecosystems, conservation practices, and sustainable resource use. Through engaging, nature-based programming, children will develop a deeper understanding of the importance of protecting and preserving natural resources. By creating statewide access to this curriculum, the initiative will encourage families and communities across Minnesota to learn about and participate in conservation efforts.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Curriculum Enhancement and Standardization

Activity Budget: \$213,600

Activity Description:

Collaborate with Coalition programming and education teams to enhance and standardize existing nature-based curriculum tailored to children ages birth-10. Build on existing resources, ensuring alignment with educational standards, and engage external experts to ensure quality and relevance.

- Form Curriculum Task Force: Assemble a team to guide curriculum development. Deliverable: Task force charter, meeting schedule, nature based programs inventory.
- Resource Audit & Gap Analysis: Review existing resources and programs to identify strengths, gaps, and standardization opportunities. Deliverable: Report on findings.
- Engagement of Subject Matter Experts: Consult environmental educators, naturalists, and child development experts for quality and inclusivity. Deliverable: Summary of expert recommendations.
- Curriculum Standardization: Standardize lesson plans, activity guides, and teaching materials for ages birth-10, adaptable for diverse communities. Deliverable: Draft curriculum for birth-2, 3-5, and 6-10.
- Enhanced Curriculum Launch: Distribute materials to Coalition museums and implement statewide. Deliverable: Implementation
- Evaluation & Reporting: Assess impact through surveys, evaluations, and community feedback. Deliverable: Evaluation report with recommendations.
- Curriculum Refinement: Review evaluations quarterly to improve curriculum in year 2. Deliverable: Updated curriculum.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Form Curriculum Task Force	February 28, 2025
Resource Audit and Gap Analysis	June 30, 2025
Engagement of Subject Matter Experts	December 31, 2025
Curriculum Standardization	June 30, 2026
Curriculum Launch	October 31, 2026
Evaluation and Reporting	April 30, 2028
Curriculum Refinement 2	June 30, 2028

Activity 2: Shared Resources and Toolkits

Activity Budget: \$86,400

Activity Description:

Provide nature-based educational tools to coalition museums, including exploration tools, observing and recording tools, educational visuals, and interactive materials. These reusable teaching aids create engaging, hands-on learning experiences, fostering environmental education across the state.

- Formation of Toolkits Task Force: Assemble a team. Deliverable: Task force charter and meeting schedule.
- Inventory of Resources: Review existing educational materials to identify reusable content. Deliverable: Resource inventory and report.
- Needs Assessment & Expert Consultation: Consult museum staff and educators to determine necessary materials. Deliverable: Needs assessment report.

- Toolkit Design: Identify components, including educational guides and interactive tools. Deliverable: Draft toolkit versions with activity instructions.
- Pilot Testing & Feedback: Test toolkits at selected museums and gather educator feedback. Deliverable: Feedback report with suggested revisions.
- Finalize & Package Toolkits: Refine materials based on feedback, produce, and package for distribution. Deliverable: Completed toolkits ready for delivery.
- Distribution & Implementation: Deliver toolkits, train museum staff, and ensure effective use. Deliverable: Distribution log, training materials, and staff participation records.
- Evaluation & Support: Collect feedback, provide ongoing support, and refine toolkits as needed. Deliverable: Evaluation report with recommendations.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Formation of Toolkits Task Force	February 28, 2025
Inventory of Existing Resources	June 30, 2025
Needs Assessment and Consultation with Experts	December 31, 2025
Design and Develop Toolkit Contents	June 30, 2026
Pilot Testing and Feedback	August 31, 2026
Finalize Toolkits	September 30, 2026
Produce and Package Toolkits	October 31, 2026
Distribute Toolkits to Coalition Museums	November 30, 2026
Staff Training and Implementation Support	November 30, 2026
Evaluation and Ongoing Support	December 31, 2026

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Sheila Bolt	Wonder Trek Museum, Brainerd	Communications Manager	Yes
Marissa Woodruff	The Works Museum, Bloomington	Director of Education	Yes
Megan Long	SPARK, Rochester	Education & Program Manager	Yes
Janie Heitz	Children's Discovery Museum, Grand Rapids	Executive Director	Yes
Janelle Benson	Children's Discovery Museum, Grand Rapids	Program & Visitor Services Manager	Yes
Jessi Wendland Boike	Wheel and Cog, Hutchinson	Chair	Yes
Drew Jensen	Duluth Children's Museum	Executive Director	Yes
Tasha Oliver	Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota	Program Facilitator	Yes

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 curriculum will be implemented statewide through Coalition museums, ensuring accessibility and consistent delivery. Once developed, the curriculum can be utilized for years, maximizing its long-term impact.

Continuous evaluation will demonstrate effectiveness. Ongoing efforts will be funded through diversified sources, including grants, donations, sponsorships, and partnerships.

Findings and products will be shared within the Coalition, ensuring continued relevance and adaptation to community needs without significant additional development costs.

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Crystal Olson

Job Title: Director of Development

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

Crystal Olson, Director of Development, will lead the project management for enhancing and standardizing the nature-based curriculum and toolkit. Collaborating closely with the Greater Minnesota Children's Museum Coalition's

programming and education teams, she will ensure the project progresses efficiently and aligns with established timelines.

With nearly a decade of experience in project management, Olson brings invaluable expertise. Previously, she successfully oversaw downtown initiatives and professional development programs, where her attention to detail and organizational skills ensured seamless execution. Her experience spans program logistics, budget management, relationship-building, and strategic planning and execution. Olson's comprehensive skill set and proven track record make her uniquely qualified to oversee the refinement and implementation of the Greater Minnesota Children's Museum Coalition's Nature Play Curriculum.

The curriculum, created and refined by licensed educators, upholds the highest standards of quality and educational integrity. The education teams at the Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota (CMSM) and other Coalition museums, led by Minnesota-licensed teachers, are highly qualified and experienced in designing impactful programs. These teams work collaboratively to expand, adapt, and align the curriculum, ensuring it continues to inspire curiosity, foster learning, and strengthen connections to the natural world.

Organization: Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota

Organization Description:

The CMSM's mission is "To ignite the natural curiosity of every child through the power of play in a dynamic, awe-inspiring environment." Giving children the opportunity to explore concepts such as environment and natural resources is a cornerstone.

CMSM attracts 100,000 visitors annually, and since its establishment has welcomed visitors from every Minnesota county, 49 states, and across the globe. CMSM features place-based exhibits and interactive experiences designed to spark curiosity and reveal the wonders of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics), agriculture, and Southern Minnesota heritage and Dakota culture.

CMSM collaborates with the Greater Minnesota Children's Museum Coalition, a network of 12 museums dedicated to expanding equitable access to high-quality educational experiences statewide. A committee of representatives from 9 of the Coalition museums with subject matter expertise has been formed for this initiative. By working together, the coalition strengthens education initiatives, ensuring children in both urban and rural areas can explore and appreciate Minnesota's ecosystems. Through shared expertise, resources, and programming, the coalition amplifies its impact, creating a more interconnected system of environmental learning. This collective effort fosters a deeper understanding of conservation and sustainability, empowering young learners to become informed, engaged stewards of the natural world.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
Program Facilitator		Facilitates the nature-based curriculum - 12 Museums participating, 2 program facilitators / museum. \$21/hour working 50 hours/year			0%	1.14		\$50,400
Playworker		Supports the nature-based curriculum facilitators - 12 Museums participating, 3 playworkers / museum. \$14/hour working 50 hours/year			0%	1.72		\$50,400
Guest Experience Coordinator		Supports the nature-based curriculum facilitators - 12 Museums participating, 3 GEC / museum. \$18/hour working 50 hours/year			0%	1.72		\$64,800
Education Manager/Director		Program oversight and facilitator - 12 Museums participating, 1 Education Manager/Director / museum. \$30/hour working 50 hours/year			0%	0.58		\$36,000
							Sub Total	\$201,600
Contracts and Services								
							Sub Total	-
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
	Tools and Supplies	Exploration Tools - Magnifying glasses, binoculars, misc. 12 museums, \$500/museum	Help children closely observe small organisms, textures, and details in nature, fostering curiosity and critical thinking.					\$6,000
	Tools and Supplies	Recording & Observation Tools - Notebooks, clipboards, pencils, colored pencils, sketchpads, misc. 12 museums, \$1,000/museum	Encourage children to document their findings, make sketches, and reflect on their experiences, supporting scientific inquiry and literacy.					\$12,000
	Tools and Supplies	Educational Visuals - Posters, models, books, guides, misc. 12 museums, \$1,000/museum	Provide reference points for identifying plants, animals, and ecological concepts, making abstract ideas more concrete and accessible.					\$12,000

	Tools and Supplies	Interactive Materials - Sensory bins/table material, fishing equipment, hydroponics set up, misc. 12 museums, \$4,700/museum	Promote active learning through sensory engagement and hands-on exploration, making ecological concepts more accessible and meaningful.					\$56,400
							Sub Total	\$86,400
Capital Expenditures								
							Sub Total	-
Acquisitions and Stewardship								
							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-
Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-
Printing and Publication								
	Printing	Signage	Signage for the programs, rotating per program, featuring learning domains, explanation of projects, etc - 12 Museums participating, \$1,000/museum					\$12,000
							Sub Total	\$12,000
Other Expenses								
							Sub Total	-
							Grand Total	\$300,000

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				
In-Kind	Out of Pocket	Staff Time for Curriculum Enhancement - Each museum is responsible for covering the cost of their own staff time required to standardize and enhance the curriculum.	Secured	\$30,000
In-Kind	Out of Pocket	Staff Time for Grant Administration- Each museum is responsible for covering the cost of their own staff time required for grant administration.	Secured	\$5,000
			Non State Sub Total	\$35,000
			Funds Total	\$35,000

Total Project Cost: \$335,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [d756b03b-8b5.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

A list of the 20 nature-based programs in the Greater Minnesota Children's Museum Coalition's Nature-Based Programs Inventory....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
CMSM Secretary of State Certificate	cdf85106-81e.pdf
CMSM 2023 IRS Form 990 and Audit	0eb5c5ef-400.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
CMSM LCCMR Proposal Letter	5b56558e-4cc.pdf

Supplemental Attachments

Capital Project Questionnaire, Budget Supplements, Support Letter, Photos, Media, Other

Title	File
CMSM LCCMR Activities & Milestones	8ef4b702-b35.pdf
CMSM Nature Based Programs Inventory - Full	488748fd-796.pdf

Administrative Use

Does your project include restoration or acquisition of land rights?

No

Do you understand that travel expenses are only approved if they follow the "Commissioner's Plan" promulgated by the Commissioner of Management of Budget or, for University of Minnesota projects, the University of Minnesota plan?

N/A

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

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 pre-design, design, construction, or renovation of a building, trail, campground, or other fixed capital asset costing \$10,000 or more or large-scale stream or wetland restoration?

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 as "the provision of care, treatment, education, training, instruction, or recreation to children")?

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

Provide the name(s) and organization(s) of additional individuals assisting in the completion of this proposal:

Sheila Bolt – Wonder Trek Museum, Brainerd
Marissa Woodruff – The Works Museum, Bloomington
Megan Long – SPARK, Rochester
Janie Heitz – Children's Discovery Museum, Grand Rapids
Janelle Benson – Children's Discovery Museum, Grand Rapids
Jessi Wendland Boike – Wheel and Cog, Hutchinson
Drew Jensen – Duluth Children's Museum
Tasha Oliver – Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota
Louise Dickmeyer - Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota
Will Waggoner - Momentum Advocacy

Do you understand that a named service contract does not constitute a funder-designated subrecipient or approval of a sole-source contract? In other words, a service contract entity is only approved if it has been selected according to the contracting rules identified in state law and policy for organizations that receive ENRTF funds through direct appropriations, or in the DNR's reimbursement manual for non-state organizations. These rules may include competitive bidding and prevailing wage requirements

N/A