



## Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

### 2026 Request for Proposal

#### General Information

**Proposal ID:** 2026-077

**Proposal Title:** Mobile Nature Center Serving Southwest Minnesota

#### Project Manager Information

**Name:** Alisha Paplow

**Organization:** Prairie Ecology Bus Center

**Office Telephone:** (507) 662-5064

**Email:** grants@ecologybus.org

#### Project Basic Information

**Project Summary:** The Prairie Ecology Bus Center will bring evidence-based, hands-on outdoor environmental education to schools, campgrounds, and county fairs throughout Southwest Minnesota, building on our strong history.

**ENRTF Funds Requested:** \$291,000

**Proposed Project Completion:** June 30, 2029

**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?**

Region(s): SW

**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.**

A common misconception is that youth in rural regions inherently know more about the environment, preservation, and conservation. In reality, Southwest Minnesota has a rich environment that many people never explore. There is only one other nature center in the 16 counties we serve; even camping enthusiasts can't participate in outdoor learning because of a sheer lack of programs here.

For 30+ years, the Prairie Ecology Bus Center's most unique program was our ENTRF-funded 32-passenger bus, the country's first mobile science classroom. The bus allowed us to bring students from schools to nearby parks to learn about the natural wonders in their own backyard. Regrettably, our bus was side-swiped and totaled in 2024, preventing countless youth from getting hands-on, nature-based learning.

This loss made us imagine new ways to bring environmental education to under-resourced and diverse Minnesotans. Of the 6,000 kids we engage annually, 43% are eligible for free or reduced lunches, compared to 37% statewide (MNDoH). Low-income students are less likely to participate in nature-based activities due to cost and transportation barriers. In addition, the region has one of the state's highest concentrations of foreign-born populations, rivaling the Twin Cities at nearly 5 percent (tcbmag.com, January 2018).

**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.**

To increase environmental education opportunities in Southwest Minnesota, we will retrofit our bus curriculum, making it even more portable and suitable to engage diverse populations in hands-on nature experiences. Specifically, we will bring hands-on outdoor environmental education to under-resourced schools, campgrounds, and county fairs.

To increase our impactful work in schools, your grant will provide local bussing from schools to nearby natural sites for 1-2 days of programming. There, a PEBC naturalist will meet them with our new comprehensive grab-and-go program kit. Bussing removes the #1 barrier for schools to work with us. It also means we can hire naturalists without Commercial Drivers Licenses and PEBC can teach at multiple sites simultaneously – increasing our capacity for outreach. (Historically, we had to send two naturalists to each school, one to drive the bus while the other educated the kids).

To reach families, we will begin offering fun, interpretive, outdoor weekend learning programs at multiple local campgrounds and expand to additional county fairs. By traveling to these sites, we reduce accessibility inequity for underrepresented and underserved communities where environmental education is limited.

**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?**

Through hands-on environmental activities in natural areas throughout Southwest Minnesota, we further ENTRF's goals by helping more than 10,000 learners, primarily children, engage with their environment, increasing their appreciation and bestowing practical tools for becoming good stewards.

Your grant will provide free bussing and 1-2 days of engaging education to 2,500+ students at 18 schools with whom we don't currently partner.

Additionally, we will reach 8,000+ Minnesotans (including 5,600 kids) by offering hands-on outdoor learning programs at campgrounds and county fairs.

To evaluate our impact, we will survey teachers and participants at campgrounds and fairs.



## Activities and Milestones

### Activity 1: Renew and build new partnerships with low-resourced schools, campgrounds, and parks.

**Activity Budget:** \$79,339

**Activity Description:**

When our bus was totaled in 2024, 7 long-time partner schools immediately suspended environmental education because of the prohibitive cost of bussing. These will be among the first schools we reach out to with good news of your grant, letting them know they can now get free local bussing from their school to a nearby natural site.

We want to go much further to reach underserved rural communities in Southwest Minnesota, however. To accomplish that, we will rely on our strong network of regional supporters and teachers to cultivate relationships with new schools, local campgrounds, and county fairs.

We will alert these potential partners about our ability to provide free bussing for schools and free hands-on interpretive programming for campgrounds that offer no environmental education. Over the course of the grant, we will have renewed or built new partnerships with 18 schools, 10 campgrounds, and 5 county fairs, all in addition to our current work.

**Activity Milestones:**

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Reactivate 5 school partnerships lacking bussing resources, build new partnerships with 4 campgrounds	June 30, 2027
Build partnerships to reach 11 schools, 7 campgrounds, 2 fairs total	June 30, 2028
Build partnerships to reach 18 schools, 10 campgrounds, 5 county fairs total	June 30, 2029

### Activity 2: Retrofit curriculum and create new content to engage diverse populations in hands-on nature experiences

**Activity Budget:** \$38,033

**Activity Description:**

PEBC is known throughout Southwest Minnesota's schools for our high quality, engaging outdoor programs and we plan to maintain that reputation as we adapt our delivery model.

Our bus curriculum included 30 minutes of teaching time while we drove students to a nearby natural area and back. With your grant, we'll retrofit our evidence-based field trips to be conducted in a shorter time frame, while ensuring the programs continue to meet state science standards.

Additionally, we'll create grab-and-go program kits, emphasizing the importance of natural resources and preservation. Program kits will include tools such as reusable specimen collecting jars (terrestrial and aquatic), prairie root displays, scat, eggs, animal furs, identification books and more. Topics will include Wonderful Wetlands, All About Birds, Minnesota Mammals, Spring Sounds Scavenger Hunt, Bugs Bugs Bugs, Ecosystems, and more. All kits will be stowed in totes, along with folding tables, ready for us to travel in our 16-country region.

Finally, staff will retool our programs for weekend programming at campgrounds. These programs will need to engage people of all ages in fun, hands-on outdoor activities; they won't need to meet the rigor of state science standards.

**Activity Milestones:**

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Revise bus curriculum for schools	August 31, 2026
Create grab-and-go kits	August 31, 2026
Create curriculum for campgrounds	May 31, 2027

### Activity 3: Bring engaging hands-on environmental education throughout Southwest Minnesota

**Activity Budget:** \$173,628

#### Activity Description:

We are eager to bring our retooled outdoor education to significantly more schools, campgrounds, and fairs in Southwest Minnesota.

During the school year, we will work with new and renewed school partners to select the most inspiring hands-on programs for their students, ranging from Prairie to Insects to Mammals and more. Each site will have 1-2 days of programming that meets state science standards. We will encourage teachers to submit evaluations afterwards so we can continue improving our offerings.

Your grant will provide local transportation assistance to a nearby natural site, funded based on the school's need. This will eliminate the #1 barrier for outdoor, off-campus environmental education. At the site, a PEBC naturalist will be ready to meet the students and educators, using their grab-and-go program kit - no matter the weather.

In addition, we will begin bringing our hands-on outdoor content to campgrounds and new county fairs, ensuring more residents of all ages in Southwest Minnesota have access to engaging environmental education. While at these programs, we hope to make new connections with teachers, homeschool parents, and community leaders for future program opportunities.

#### Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Assist 5 schools with transportation cost/provide hands-on programs at 4 campgrounds	June 30, 2027
Assist 11 schools with transportation/provide programs at 7 campgrounds, 2 new county fairs	June 30, 2028
Assist 18 schools with transportation/provide hands-on programs at 10 campgrounds, 5 county fairs	June 30, 2029

## 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 Prairie Ecology Bus Center is grateful for diversified funding from individuals, local businesses, a private foundation, memberships, and program income, as well as charitable gambling revenue. This funding has sustained our ongoing, long-term namesake bus program for 30+ years.

Your funding will help us adapt and increase our capacity to provide environmental education throughout Southwest Minnesota. Through new outreach at campgrounds and fairs, we will inspire participants to become members/sponsors. Your grant will help us test a new approach for delivering environmental education, and we hope to leverage its results with additional foundations in years to come.

## Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

**Project Manager Name:** Alisha Paplow

**Job Title:** Executive Director

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

Alisha has a lifetime of personal commitment and nearly two decades' professional experience working to instill a passion for nature in Minnesotans of all ages. With a Bachelors of Science in Natural Resources and an emphasis in Park Management from University of Minnesota - Crookston, Alisha is uniquely qualified for this work.

Born and raised in Minnesota, Alisha has lived in Southwest Minnesota since childhood. She began working at the Prairie Ecology Bus Center in 2008, starting as a naturalist before her promotion to program coordinator and ultimately executive director in 2018.

Alisha excels at building partnerships and working alongside staff to create, implement, and evaluate programs, creating new ways to keep things fresh and interesting and take advantage of current events and innovations. During the COVID pandemic, Alisha capably led the organization through a triple crisis – schools closing, demand from families for outdoor programming soaring, and charitable gambling funds evaporating simultaneously. Alisha and staff rapidly pivoted and expanded programming to meet the need.

Outside of work, Alisha enjoys time with her husband and two sons, especially outdoors.

**Organization:** Prairie Ecology Bus Center

**Organization Description:**

Since 1990, the Prairie Ecology Bus Center has provided hands-on environmental programming for learners of all ages. Serving 16 of Minnesota's 87 counties within 90 miles of Lakefield, we offer nature-based excursions to engage youth and their families.

Historically, our most unique program was our 32-passenger bus (funded through ENTRF when we were the Heron Lake Environmental Learning Center!). It was the country's first mobile science classroom, with microscopes, macrosopes, large monitors, and more. The bus allowed us to bring students from schools throughout our region to nearby parks to learn about the natural wonders in their own backyard.

Regrettably, our bus was side-swiped by a semi and totaled in 2024. This forced us to pause, acknowledge the hidden

blessings in this disaster, and imagine new ways to advance our mission in Southwest Minnesota. That is the focus of this proposal.

In addition to the bus, our extensive regional outreach includes school assemblies, afterschool programs, a traveling planetarium, and presentations to community organizations. Our local Lakefield programming has grown to include onsite summer camps, preschool and homeschool programs, birthday parties, plus our annual Prairie Winds Kite Fly. We reach more than 6,000+ youth and their families annually.

## Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
<b>Personnel</b>								
Executive Director		Project Manager, purchasing, cultivating partnerships			22%	0.51		\$45,200
Program Coordinator		Scheduling, Cultivating partnerships, Creating content, Teaching			21%	0.81		\$58,400
Naturalists		Co-creating content, Teaching			21%	1.02		\$58,700
Seasonal Naturalists		Support roles in teaching			1%	0.75		\$32,500
Communication/Marketing Manager		Create brochures/Flyers for programs			22%	0.1		\$4,500
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$199,300</b>
<b>Contracts and Services</b>								
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Equipment, Tools, and Supplies</b>								
	Equipment	Animal Furs - approximately 11	To be part of grab-and-go kits so people can touch and see them up close					\$1,450
	Equipment	Replica Scat - 12 animals	To be part of grab-and-go kits to teach others what scat they might see					\$225
	Equipment	Replica Skulls - 26 animals	To be part of grab-and-go kits to teach others what skulls look like					\$3,800
	Equipment	Replica bird eggs - 26 eggs and stands	To be part of grab-and-go kits to teach others what bird eggs they are looking at					\$850
	Equipment	Insect Specimens - 140 insects	To be part of grab-and-go kits to teach others what insects are in the area					\$650
	Equipment	Collection jars - 45	To be part of grab-and-go kits to collect insects to look at up close					\$125
	Equipment	ID Books - 294	To be part of grab-and-go kits to help ID flora/fauna on programs					\$2,700



	Equipment	Prairie Root Display - 4	To be part of grab-and-go kits to show the root system of prairie plants					\$10,000
	Equipment	Education models & Displays - 18	To enhance grab-and-go kits at campgrounds and fairs					\$2,000
	Equipment	Other equipment - 14	Canopies, weights and folding tables incase there isn't a shelter to use for programs					\$3,000
	Equipment	12 Rubbermaid Totes	Store equipment for each grab-and-go kits					\$300
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$25,100</b>
<b>Capital Expenditures</b>								
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Acquisitions and Stewardship</b>								
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Travel In Minnesota</b>								
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Travel to 18 school programs, approximately 2 days each at approximately 180 miles for a total of 6,480 miles in 3 years	Staff will need to travel to natural area near schools to conduct field trips					\$8,600
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Travel for one day to 7 county fairs approximately 180 miles each for a total of 1,260 miles in 3 years	Staff will travel to area county fairs to provide programs.					\$1,400
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Travel a total of 36 days to 21 campgrounds at approximately 120 miles for a total of 30,240 miles in 3 years	Staff will travel to area campgrounds for programs					\$26,200
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$36,200</b>
<b>Travel Outside Minnesota</b>								
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Printing and Publication</b>								
	Printing	Approximately 450 brochures/flyers	To share with potential schools, campgrounds & fairs					\$400
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$400</b>
<b>Other Expenses</b>								

		Transportation assistance for approximately 30 schools in the next 3 years	Assist with needed transportation to nearby nature site for programs					\$30,000
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$30,000</b>
							<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$291,000</b>

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				
			Non State Sub Total	-
			Funds Total	-

Total Project Cost: \$291,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

## Attachments

### Required Attachments

#### *Visual Component*

File: [7ae1ce4c-205.pdf](#)

#### *Alternate Text for Visual Component*

The flyer features a graphic of the 16 county area we serve, our goal through the LCCMR grant, five images of children enjoying hands-on learning programs, and a teacher's testimonial. A QR code links to the PEBC website for more information....

#### *Financial Capacity*

Title	File
Prairie Ecology Bus Center Charitable Gambling Audit 2023	<a href="#">dccb40d8-d05.pdf</a>
Prairie Ecology Bus Center 990T for 2023	<a href="#">219a1a0d-f3d.pdf</a>
Prairie Ecology Bus Center 990 for 2023	<a href="#">028e3abe-d56.pdf</a>

#### *Board Resolution or Letter*

Title	File
Prairie Ecology Bus Center Board Resolution	<a href="#">5e04bc8f-b11.pdf</a>

### Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
Prairie Ecology Bus Center Letter of Support 3	<a href="#">c284b00f-4a1.pdf</a>
Prairie Ecology Bus Center Letter of Support 2	<a href="#">b0942f0f-86f.pdf</a>
Prairie Ecology Bus Center Letter of Support 1	<a href="#">1dee508e-eea.pdf</a>

## 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?**

Yes, I understand the Commissioner's Plan applies.

**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:**

Erica Vockrodt, Sara Spoonheim

**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