



## Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

### 2026 Request for Proposal

#### General Information

**Proposal ID:** 2026-359

**Proposal Title:** Building Belonging and Environmental Literacy Among Queer Youth

#### Project Manager Information

**Name:** Jennifer Tonko

**Organization:** Clean River Partners

**Office Telephone:** (507) 786-3913

**Email:** jennifer@cleanriverpartners.org

#### Project Basic Information

**Project Summary:** QUEERY is a free nature club for queer and questioning middle and high school youth that teaches outdoor skills, builds community, and explores how queerness manifests in the natural world.

**ENRTF Funds Requested:** \$87,000

**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): SE

**What is the best scale to describe the area impacted by your work?**

Region(s): SE

**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.**

Clean River Partners piloted Queer Unity, Environmental Education, and Recreation for Youth (QUEERY) during the 2024-2025 school year with the support of a DNR No Child Left Inside grant. This program was developed because of the lack of outdoor clubs and recreation opportunities for queer youth in Minnesota, especially outside of the Metro Area. Many existing groups have been historically grounded in the gender binary (e.g. Girl and Boy Scouts) and thus aren't welcoming for gender-expansive youth, or they are geared toward queer adults and aren't built for young people. Since our inaugural gathering in October 2024, we've had 14 youth from 8 communities register for this program, telling us that this project fills a gap for youth experiencing social barriers to outdoor recreation and 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.**

This program builds on our approach of reaching youth by centering their identities, bringing them outdoors, and connecting their identities to the natural world. Once a month, participants will meet for a unique outdoor recreation or education experience, whether it be hiking, paddling, camping, invasive species removal, or another experience. These activities will take place in various locations in southeast Minnesota and will be supplemented with interpretive programming led by a queer naturalist and guest teachers, when applicable. Through repeated positive exposure to the outdoors, participants will begin to feel a sense of belonging in natural spaces and will feel more empowered to go out on their own. Participants will also develop a sense of empathy, guardianship, and responsibility for the natural world by engaging with interpretive programming grounded in queer ecologies and climate change education. As they see their queerness reflected in the natural world around them, participants will build a personal connection with nature, inspiring them to take action to protect it.

**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 project's outcomes are to empower queer youth in Southeastern Minnesota to 1) explore the outdoors, 2) connect across communities, and 3) engage in environmental stewardship. Learning objectives include: 1) 80% of participants citing three examples of queerness in nature; 2) 80% acquiring basic outdoor skills like navigation, paddling, and plant identification; 3) 80% demonstrating an understanding of Indigenous history and local Native land stewardship. QUEERY will achieve these goals through monthly expeditions.

## Activities and Milestones

### Activity 1: Develop QUEERY monthly activities

**Activity Budget:** \$29,000

**Activity Description:**

Clean River Partners staff will work with existing QUEERY participants and community partners to determine engaging activities. CRP staff will then develop learning objectives, engagement goals, and activities for each session. Clean River Partners will recruit participants for the monthly activities on an ongoing basis, with special attention near the beginning and end of each school year. CRP will coordinate venues, equipment, supplies, and guest teachers (as appropriate) for each session.

**Activity Milestones:**

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Develop Fall-Winter 2026 activities	December 31, 2026
Develop Spring-Summer 2027 activities	June 30, 2027
Develop Fall-Winter 2027 activities	December 31, 2027
Develop Spring-Summer 2028 activities	June 30, 2028
Develop Fall-Winter 2028 activities	December 31, 2028
Develop Spring-Summer 2029 activities	June 30, 2029

### Activity 2: Execute and evaluate QUEERY monthly activities

**Activity Budget:** \$58,000

**Activity Description:**

Clean River Partners will host monthly QUEERY events and activities. CRP will collect pre- and post-session metrics on learning objectives and engagement goals each session. CRP will develop, conduct, and analyze a final survey that measures overall learning and engagement for each project year. CRP will collect participant information including demographics and participation rates during the project period.

**Activity Milestones:**

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Host Fall-Winter 2026 activities	December 31, 2026
Host Spring-Summer 2027 activities	June 30, 2027
Develop and implement 2026-2027 annual survey	June 30, 2027
Host Fall-Winter 2027 activities	December 31, 2027
Host Spring-Summer 2028 activities	June 30, 2028
Develop and implement 2027-2028 annual survey	June 30, 2028
Host Fall-Winter 2028 activities	December 31, 2028
Host Spring-Summer 2029 activities	June 30, 2029
Develop and implement 2028-2029 annual survey	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?**

During the project, we will track participant numbers and progress toward learning objectives. For example, we will assess participant's abilities to identify a species before and after presentations and observe proficiency in hands-on activities like paddling or map navigation. Participation data will gauge program demand, while learning assessments will measure benefits. Based on results, we will adjust methods as needed. Near the project's end, we will evaluate ongoing need, explore funding options, and share findings with partners to support the system of outdoor education development.

## Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

**Project Manager Name:** Jennifer Tonko

**Job Title:** Executive Director

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

Since 2023, Jennifer Tonko has served as the executive director of Clean River Partners, an organization that inspires people to value, protect, and improve the Cannon River Watershed and beyond. Tonko previously worked for seven years with the Minnesota Humanities Center where she led the We Are Water MN program, a partnership of seven statewide organizations that builds people's relationships with and responsibilities to water, and the Why Treaties Matter program, a program that centers Indigenous perspectives on treaty law and Native sovereignty. Her work focuses on building collaborations, providing people with education and reflection opportunities, and building community capacity for systemic change.

**Organization:** Clean River Partners

**Organization Description:**

Clean River Partners is a small environmental nonprofit based in Northfield, Minnesota. Clean River Partners helps people and organizations value, protect, and improve the Cannon River Watershed's land and water. The watershed spans about 1,000,000 acres across parts of six counties and includes cities like Faribault, Northfield, Owatonna, and Red Wing.

We work toward our mission by developing activities related to our strategic focus areas of 1) building land, water, and climate health, 2) building community relationships, 3) creating connections between people and the outdoors, and 4) developing our organizational capacity. Our vision is to foster communities that collaboratively create and protect watersheds with healthy soils; drinkable groundwater; and clean, fishable, and swimmable rivers, lakes, and streams.

## Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
<b>Personnel</b>								
Community Engagement Coordinator		Develop educational and engagement content and facilitate monthly gatherings			24.5%	0.45		\$31,000
Communications Coordinator		Create communications for the project			25.4%	0.15		\$10,000
Executive Director		Project oversight and staff supervision			19%	0.06		\$7,000
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$48,000</b>
<b>Contracts and Services</b>								
TBD	Service Contract	Serving as a guest teacher for a QUEERY gathering				0.06		\$6,000
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$6,000</b>
<b>Equipment, Tools, and Supplies</b>								
	Equipment	Outdoor gear rental (kayaks, camping gear) and admissions fees	Equipment rental so all youth can participate in activities and admission fees for facilities with admissions costs					\$12,000
	Tools and Supplies	Pens, markers, nature journals, binoculars, gloves, and other miscellaneous small supplies for developed activities	Supplies for youth participation					\$6,000
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$18,000</b>
<b>Capital Expenditures</b>								
							<b>Sub Total</b>	-
<b>Acquisitions and Stewardship</b>								
							<b>Sub Total</b>	-

<b>Travel In Minnesota</b>								
	Other	Accessible van rental and driver fee for up to four trips per year for youth	Transporting youth to gathering sites					\$15,000
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$15,000</b>
<b>Travel Outside Minnesota</b>								
							<b>Sub Total</b>	-
<b>Printing and Publication</b>								
							<b>Sub Total</b>	-
<b>Other Expenses</b>								
							<b>Sub Total</b>	-
							<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$87,000</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: \$87,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes



## Attachments

### Required Attachments

#### *Visual Component*

File: [ca0155bb-b7d.pdf](#)

#### *Alternate Text for Visual Component*

This graphic includes images of youth participating in the QUEERY program by nature journaling and visiting an aquarium. It also shows the home communities of QUEERY participants, which currently include Belle Plaine, Bloomington, Cannon Falls, Faribault, Nicollet, Northfield, Prior Lake, and Scandia....

#### *Financial Capacity*

Title	File
Clean River Partners 990, 2023	<a href="#">2d640e69-389.pdf</a>

#### *Board Resolution or Letter*

Title	File
Clean River Partners board resolution	<a href="#">6dc913de-797.pdf</a>

### Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
Evidence of nonprofit status	<a href="#">350a42aa-318.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:**

Jennifer Tonko, Clean River Partners

**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**

Yes, I understand