



## Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

### 2026 Request for Proposal

#### General Information

**Proposal ID:** 2026-396

**Proposal Title:** Southeast Minnesota Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Initiative

#### Project Manager Information

**Name:** Skip Langer

**Organization:** Olmsted County

**Office Telephone:** (507) 328-7140

**Email:** skip.langer@olmstedcounty.gov

#### Project Basic Information

**Project Summary:** To collaboratively address rising nitrate trends in groundwater on a regional scale by implementing soil health practices on private land in southeastern Minnesota where groundwater is susceptible to contamination.

**ENRTF Funds Requested:** \$9,000,000

**Proposed Project Completion:** December 31, 2029

**LCCMR Funding Category:** Land (F)

#### 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.**

Protecting groundwater in Southeast Minnesota is very important because it serves as most of the regions drinking water supply and sustains local industries and communities. Extensive research completed across southeast Minnesota has revealed soil health practice adoption is key to reducing nitrate leaching from agricultural sources into groundwater. Improving soil health through expansion of the Olmsted County program provides a long-term strategy to reduce drinking water nitrate contamination within karst regions of Southeast Minnesota. Groundwater is susceptible to contamination in karst geology because of shallow soils and carbonate bedrock which is porous and fractured. Karst drinking water aquifers have limited protection from pollutants such as nitrate which originate at the land surface and move readily within the karst system.

Olmsted County has piloted a successful soil health program since 2023. In 2024, nearly 25% of Olmsted County agricultural producers reported more than 19,000 acres under the local program. In year 2023 and 2024 reported practices have prevented an estimated 405,000 pounds of nitrogen from entering groundwater; this equates to 23.8 semi-loads of urea fertilizer. Each year, enrollment acres have increased and for each acre enrolled, two acres are planted, doubling the environmental impact from monies invested.

**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 southeast regional groundwater protection and soil health initiative will promote management practices which reduce nitrate leaching from agricultural land. Practices such as converting traditional row crop systems to alternative nitrogen smart crops and small grains; cover crops to extend the duration living roots are in the ground; adding haying and grazing acres for our livestock operations and enhancing existing pasture conditions reduce nitrate leaching. They also increase carbon retention, limit soil erosion, and protect all water resources.

The initiative promotes practices and program requirements that are new and different from traditional conservation programs in the following ways: 1) It is a results-based incentive program where a producer is paid if requirements of the program are met (i.e. growing cover crop to a specific minimum height). 2) Includes a menu of add-on financial incentives to maximize groundwater protection and soil health impacts and provides producers with a variety of options that work best with their agricultural systems. 3) The web-based application and certification process can be easily and conveniently completed by a producer at home/anywhere. 4) Promoting soil health education opportunities and peer-to-peer learning is a priority to expanding participation and adoption rates.

**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 regional soil health program will reduce nitrate in groundwater, increase producer participation and acres enrolled in soil health practices. 150,000 acres are projected to be certified over the 3-year program timeframe which will prevent nearly 4.5 million pounds of nitrogen fertilizer from leaching into groundwater. A minimum of 1000 producers will have the opportunity to participate in the program. Education is a cornerstone of this program, SWCDs will host up to 25 educational events throughout the region for farmers. Additional outcomes include reducing soil erosion, fuel consumption and increasing carbon sequestration.

## Activities and Milestones

### Activity 1: Increase the adoption of soil health practices into the crop rotations on Southeastern Minnesota farms

**Activity Budget:** \$8,400,000

**Activity Description:**

Engage southeastern Minnesota farmers on three objectives to expand soil health practice adoption on farms and protect groundwater. 1) Plant cover crops to increase roots in the ground on both sides of the annual cropping season. Cover crops uptake nutrient during their growth cycle and prevent leaching by storing nitrogen in its biomass. Once terminated, this nitrogen release is spread out over the annual crops growth cycle and provides a source of nitrogen as the cover crop breaks down, reducing commercial fertilizer needs. 2) Planting small grains/alternative crops brings diversity back into the agricultural landscape which is desired in healthy living systems. Alternative crops, like oats as an example, need less nutrient during their growth which means fewer nutrient inputs are required and nitrate losses during the growing season is reduced to nearly zero. Alternative crops break the nitrate loss cycle typically seen in a corn-corn or corn-soybean rotation. 3) Expanding opportunities for new haying and grazing acres engages livestock producers, an important sector of our southeastern Minnesota agriculture. Converting cropland acres to new haying or grazing also reduces commercial nutrient inputs dramatically. Cattle on pasture distribute manure randomly across the vegetated landscape and alfalfa's deep roots protect soil.

**Activity Milestones:**

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Year 1: implement soil health practices across the 11-county Southeast MN area	December 31, 2027
Year 2: Implement soil health practices across the 11-county Southeast MN area	December 31, 2028
Year 3: Implement soil health practices across the 11-county Southeast MN area	December 31, 2029

### Activity 2: Provide technical assistance to farmers to aid in the implementation of soil health practices

**Activity Budget:** \$550,000

**Activity Description:**

SWCDs have a variety of qualified technical staff that earn and carry credentialing called Job Approval Authority (JAA). This credentialing is earned overtime through their commitment to providing on-farm assistance to farmers to address resource concerns that meet the requirements of the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Ecological Sciences and Engineering Standards in their Field Office Technical Guide (eFOTG). Once SWCD technical staff demonstrates proficiency in applying these practices to the landscape, they are assigned JAA and can continue to deliver the valued technical services to farmers. Southeast Minnesota SWCDs employs many staff that are technically proficient at designing and implementing soil health ecological sciences practices like cover crops, alternative cropping and haying and grazing systems management. As farmers enroll in the Soil Health Program, SWCD technical staff will work with them as needed to determine recommended seed varieties, seed planting rates, and planting timing. Technical staff are available to answer many questions that may arise when establishing new practices to ensure that the practice is implemented successfully. Assistance is also provided throughout the growing season to ensure that questions are addressed as well as providing guidance at termination or harvest when soil health practices are certified for payment.

**Activity Milestones:**

Description	Approximate Completion Date
-------------	-----------------------------

Year 1: SWCD staff provide technical assistance to farmers to successfully implement soil health practices	December 31, 2027
Year 2: SWCD staff provide technical assistance to farmers to successfully implement soil health practices	December 31, 2028
Year 3: SWCD staff provide technical assistance to farmers to successfully implement soil health practices	December 31, 2029

### Activity 3: Administer LCCMR grant for the southeastern Minnesota region

**Activity Budget:** \$50,000

**Activity Description:**

Olmsted SWCD will dedicate staff time to the administration of the grant, its fiscal management and reporting. This will include subcontracting with each of the other ten entities, ensuring that program policies and procedures and cost sharing amounts for practices are uniform across the region. Olmsted SWCD's program experience will help ensure that certification requirements are met and that payment dissemination to farmers are all similarly implemented across the region. Olmsted SWCD will collect required data back from the other program participants to report back to LCCMR regarding the annual impacts of the program regionally and to keep regional staff on task with annual milestones.

**Activity Milestones:**

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Year 1: annual reporting to LCCMR	December 31, 2027
Year 2: Annual reporting to LCCMR	December 31, 2028
Year 3: Annual reporting to LCCMR	December 31, 2029

## Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Beau Kennedy	Goodhue Soil & Water Conservation District	Goodhue SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Goodhue.	Yes
Terri Peters	Wabasha Soil & Water Conservation District	Wabasha SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Wabasha.	Yes
Wanda Anderson	Winona Soil & Water Conservation District	Winona SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Winona.	Yes
Dave Walter	Root River Soil & Water Conservation District	Root River SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Houston.	Yes
Riley Buley	Fillmore Soil and Water Conservation District	Fillmore SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Fillmore.	Yes
Cody Fox	Mower Soil and Water Conservation District	Mower SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Mower.	Yes
Steve Pahs	Rice Soil and Water Conservation District	Rice SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Rice.	Yes
Eric Gulbransen	Steele Soil and Water Conservation District	Steele SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Steele.	Yes
Lindsey Cornell	Freeborn Soil and Water Conservation District	Freeborn SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Freeborn.	Yes
Jessica Klingfus	Dodge Soil and Water Conservation District	Dodge SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Dodge.	Yes
Skip Langer	Olmsted Soil and Water Conservation District	Olmsted SWCD will be a partner in the regional program and implement practices within the county of Olmsted.	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?**

Southeast SWCDs have been implementing soil health practices on a small scale for many years and have an excellent

track record of working with farmers to implement conservation practices that reduce erosion, improve surface water quality, and protect groundwater resources. This LCCMR program offers an opportunity to take that experience and expand it on a broader landscape scale where the practices can cumulatively impact a far greater number of cropland acres than ever before. This collaborative effort will incentivize the benefits of soil health practice adoption and seeks to normalize and integrate their use in southeast Minnesota's agricultural systems.

## Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

**Project Manager Name:** Skip Langer

**Job Title:** Olmsted County SWCD Soil Conservation Manager

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

Working nearly 26 years for Olmsted Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), and almost ten years as Manager, I have worked with and managed dozens of grants of varying amounts and duration. Most of grant funding comes to the district through the State of Minnesota (Funding Agencies: BWSR, MPCA, MDA, MDH). We have also received grants from federal (USDA, EPA) and non-profit sources (McKnight Foundation, The Nature Conservancy). All the grants require the development of a work plan detailing project goals and activities, a budget defining program costs, contracting with farmers and landowners, subcontracting with other entities to perform additional grant activities, expense tracking, and reporting including interim and final reporting. Olmsted SWCD, as a team, has been very successful in fulfilling our responsibilities under these grants and regionally across southeastern Minnesota, SWCDs have a long history of working collaboratively to successfully implement programming to the public to achieve grant goals while providing high quality services to farmers and landowners.

**Organization:** Olmsted County

### **Organization Description:**

Olmsted County is a local unit of government that serves over 160,000 residents and includes Minnesota's third largest city, Rochester. Our mission includes building a sustainable foundation for a safe, healthy, and welcoming community through public service excellence. Olmsted County values its citizens and shares a vision with them where we all live in a vibrant community where everyone thrives. Annual goals and priorities guide the work of staff, our program and services delivery and promotes the well-being for residents and visitors alike. These values include: Community Trust and Engagement, Community Safety and Well-Being, Environmental Sustainability, Responsible Growth and Development and striving to employ an Effective and Engaged Workforce. Olmsted County's Board of Commissioners supports innovative, creative, effective and efficient programming by its employees for consumption by county residents. Olmsted County encouraged the development of a local Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Initiative utilizing ARPA funds from the pandemic to create our local soil health program. The Olmsted SWCD promotes the program where thousands of acres have been planted in Olmsted County since the program initiated in 2023. There is continued program growth in 2025 which precipitated the regional expansion of the program as an Olmsted County legislative priority.

## Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
<b>Personnel</b>								
Olmsted SWCD Technical Assistance		SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting, certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.			20%	0.36		\$50,000
Day to day & Fiscal Management - Olmsted SWCD		Develop subagreements with 10 southeastern Minnesota counties to deliver the soil health initiative within their respective county. Ensure program goals are being met across the region, assist with regional training through the application and certification process, work with southeast SWCDs on program results and reporting process			20%	0.36		\$50,000
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$100,000</b>
<b>Contracts and Services</b>								
Goodhue SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting, certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.				0.36		\$50,000
Wabasha SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting, certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.				0.36		\$50,000
Winona SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting,				0.36		\$50,000

		certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.						
Root River SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting, certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.				0.36		\$50,000
Fillmore SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting, certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.				0.36		\$50,000
Mower SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting, certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.				0.36		\$50,000
Freeborn SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting, certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.				0.36		\$50,000
Steele SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting, certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.				0.36		\$50,000
Rice SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting,				0.36		\$50,000

		certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.						
Dodge SWCD	Subaward	SWCDs will provide technical assistance to participating farmers to implement the selected soil health conservation practices. SWCDs will also complete application evaluation, contracting, certification reviews, payment voucher development and cost share payment dissemination. Reporting to Fiscal agent will be required.				0.36		\$50,000
							Sub Total	\$500,000
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								

		Payments to farmers to Implement soil health practices on private lands	Implementation of soil health practices on farms across the southeastern Minnesota landscape following program requirements to reduce nitrate leaching into groundwater					\$8,400,000
							<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>\$8,400,000</b>
							<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$9,000,000</b>

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

Category/Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request
---------------	---------------------	-------------	--

Non ENRTF Funds

Category	Specific Source	Use	Status	Amount
State				
			State Sub Total	-
Non-State				
			Non State Sub Total	-
			Funds Total	-

Total Project Cost: \$9,000,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

## Attachments

### Required Attachments

#### *Visual Component*

File: [eb40f453-e9d.pdf](#)

#### *Alternate Text for Visual Component*

Southeast Regional Groundwater Protection and Soil Health Initiative fact sheet...

#### *Financial Capacity*

Title	File
2023 Olmsted County Financial Statement	<a href="#">40d3bba9-689.pdf</a>
Olmsted SWCD 2023 Financial Statement/Audit by Peterson Company Inc	<a href="#">52a9416f-8db.pdf</a>

#### *Board Resolution or Letter*

Title	File
Resolution 25-40_LCCMR application submittal approval by Olmsted Co Board	<a href="#">376c14b5-ebc.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?**

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?**

Yes, Olmsted County Finance

**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")?

No

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

Skip Langer, Olmsted County & SWCD

**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