



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2026 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2026-402

Proposal Title: Empowering Small Business Energy Savings in Greater Minnesota

Project Manager Information

Name: Melissa Birch

Organization: U of MN - Extension Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships

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Email: mbirch@umn.edu

Project Basic Information

Project Summary: The project will scale up assistance to Greater Minnesota small businesses and nonprofits to help them identify and implement energy efficiency and renewable energy projects, reducing their costs and emissions.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$1,900,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2029

LCCMR Funding Category: Energy (E)

Project Location

What is the best scale for describing where your work will take place?

Region(s): Central, NE, NW, SE, 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.

Minnesota's commercial and industrial sectors together account for approximately half of the state's total energy consumption, with associated emissions of pollutants (US EIA). Significant savings potential has been identified, from refrigeration to roof-top units to lighting and mechanical systems (see CARD studies, Minnesota Department of Commerce).

For instance, EnerChange finds that annual savings on energy costs average \$4,000-\$6,000 for the nonprofits they serve, while in the industrial sector, MnTAP finds that their average implemented recommendation saves clients \$10,000/year and nearly 112,000 kWh/year (MnTAP typically makes 2-4 core recommendations per site visit.) For renewables, a 40kW solar array generates roughly 60,000 kWh annually.

Realizing those savings can be challenging, however. Through over 20 years of experience providing assistance to organizations across Minnesota, CERTs has identified barriers to implementation:

- * Knowledge gaps (savings potential, technologies, assistance programs, incentives and financing options);
- * Lack of time and capacity;
- * Geographic and sectoral variation in available services, especially qualified contractors and utility programs;
- * Need to stack different sources of capital in a complex and evolving funding landscape; and
- * Trust gaps, especially among underserved businesses.

Assistance from trusted organizations with reliable information can help them navigate these challenges and opportunities.

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.

With this initiative, CERTs will establish a network of business energy resource hubs by partnering with regional and community-based organizations trusted by businesses and nonprofits in Greater Minnesota. CERTs and the partner organizations will help businesses and nonprofits advance cost-saving energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.

Components of this initiative include:

- * Resource development, capacity-building, and coordination across regional development organizations, community-based organizations, utilities, and university partners, with the objective of adding and strengthening business energy programming.
- * Direct support to businesses interested in exploring energy-related opportunities, engaging at least 600 small businesses and nonprofits (through information sharing, energy audits, renewable energy assessments, and other project assistance), with at least 250 implementing clean energy measures.
- * Creating a replicable model, collectively identifying lessons learned and adapting approaches as needed. This includes cross-pollination with a parallel project in the Metro: the Small Business Equitable Energy Decarbonization Initiative (SBEEDI).

The proposed project takes a holistic approach to increasing cost-effective clean energy deployment among small businesses and nonprofits by bringing together the various pieces needed for success—reliable information, energy assessments for customized recommendations, and funding and financing options—into a network of partners who can provide ongoing assistance as energy-saving projects are identified and implemented.

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 project supports short- and long-term reductions in energy-related emissions and costs through:

- * Development and broad dissemination of accessible, Minnesota-specific informational resources on business clean energy;
- * Establishment of a network of organizations able to provide reliable clean energy information and assistance to their communities, establishing and strengthening connections across regional development organizations, business-serving community-based organizations, utilities, and sources of project funding and financing;
- * Implementation of at least 250 projects, reducing emissions and providing cost savings for businesses and nonprofits; and
- * Documentation and dissemination of project learnings to regional development organizations, business-serving CBOs, utilities, and funders to facilitate deepening and replication.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Capacity-building in local and regional organizations to support businesses and nonprofits with energy-related projects.

Activity Budget: \$372,000

Activity Description:

Objective: Establish a network of organizations trusted by businesses and nonprofits to provide reliable information and assistance on clean energy project implementation. Potential partner organizations include regional development organizations, business-serving community-based organizations, utilities, governmental entities, and community development financial institutions.

Tasks:

* 1.1: Establish partnerships with business-serving organizations.

* 1.2: Identify and, as needed, facilitate the enabling of appropriate financing instruments for clean energy projects.

Connect local and regional organizations (including CDFIs) with Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) programs, as well as with MnCIFA (for which CERTs has been named a navigator). Outcome: Financing options identified and/or enabled for each Greater Minnesota region. Impact: Mitigation of some financial barriers to project implementation.

* 1.3: Co-create training curricula and resource libraries for local partner organizations and for businesses and nonprofits. Outcome: Resources developed and tailored for regional needs and opportunities: slide decks, simple steps documents, videos, qualified contractor lists, relevant incentives, and funding and financing options. Impact: Relevant, reliable, accessible information available to help mitigate knowledge barriers to project implementation.

* 1.4: Train staff at partner organizations. Outcome: Partner staff are knowledgeable / comfortable sharing clean energy information. Impact: Partner staff ready to provide effective clean energy assistance.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Contracting completed with four organizations, including specific outreach, assistance, and project implementation goals for each.	September 30, 2026
Initial list of funding and financing options compiled; gaps identified.	September 30, 2026
Locally relevant resources developed for all regions of Greater Minnesota.	March 31, 2027
Training completed for core project partner staff.	March 31, 2027
Updated list of funding and financing options compiled and disseminated.	June 30, 2027
Training materials made broadly available to other local and regional organizations.	June 30, 2027

Activity 2: Clean energy project assistance to businesses and nonprofits.

Activity Budget: \$1,341,000

Activity Description:

Objective: Assist small businesses and nonprofits in identifying and implementing cost-effective energy efficiency and/or renewable energy projects.

Tasks:

* 2.1: Identify high priority audiences, prioritizing sectors and geographic areas with high energy usage and costs.

Identify appropriate engagement strategies, including consultation with the local utility to identify synergistic programs and efforts, as well as identification of other local partners. Outcome: Audiences identified and partnerships strengthened. Impact: Groundwork for successful implementation.

* 2.2: Engage and recruit businesses and nonprofits to participate in clean energy programs, starting with energy audits and/or renewable energy assessments as needed. Where local audit programs already exist, the project will make use of those. Where programs are not available, audits will be conducted by the project team, including contracted services.

Outcome: Businesses and nonprofits engaged and impactful, cost-effective clean energy measures identified. Impact: Overcome language barriers and gaps in trust, knowledge, and service availability.

* 2.3: Provide continued assistance to interested businesses and nonprofits, including contractor selection, funding/financing options, and project implementation. Outcome: At least 250 businesses implement energy efficiency measures or renewable energy projects. Impact: Reduced energy-related costs and emissions of pollutants; improved comfort and resilience.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Partner organizations' business and nonprofit engagement strategies developed.	December 31, 2026
At least 150 businesses/nonprofits engaged.	June 30, 2027
At least 500 businesses/nonprofits engaged.	June 30, 2028
At least 600 businesses/nonprofits engaged.	December 31, 2028
Plans in place for ongoing assistance to businesses still in the process of implementing projects.	June 30, 2029

Activity 3: Creation of a replicable model for a network of business energy resource hubs.

Activity Budget: \$187,000

Activity Description:

Objective: Establish a network of organizations integrating clean energy assistance into their work, building connections across RDOs, business-serving CBOs, utilities, and sources of project funding and financing. Document and disseminate project learnings to facilitate deepening and replication.

Tasks:

* 3.1: Design and implement an evaluation strategy for the program. Track businesses/nonprofits served and outcomes (including energy and monetary savings). Collect feedback from businesses. Analyze results in relation to strategies used. Convene partners at least annually to collectively identify lessons learned from the year and to adapt approaches as needed for the next year. Outcome: Robust documentation of challenges, successes, and strategies for effective implementation. Impact: Facilitate expansion and replication of the model.

* 3.2: Capture and share stories of businesses and nonprofits taking action. Outcome: Storytelling that helps business and nonprofit audiences learn about clean energy opportunities. Impact: Build momentum in communities around clean energy.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
First convening of partners.	September 30, 2027
At least one story published.	September 30, 2027
At least one additional story published.	June 30, 2028
Second convening of partners.	September 30, 2028
Third convening of partners.	May 31, 2029
Report published and shared in a webinar.	June 30, 2029

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Melissa Birch	CERTs / University of Minnesota Extension RSDP	Project management; development of resources; renewable energy assessments and project implementation assistance; facilitate conversations on funding and financing options; coordinate program implementation in northern Minnesota; lead direct business engagement and technical assistance in central and west-central Minnesota and support efforts across other regions; lead storytelling and evaluation.	Yes
Jason Walker	CERTs / Southwest Regional Development Commission	Collaborate on resource development and tailoring for local needs and opportunities; lead direct business engagement and coordinate program implementation in southern Minnesota; assist with program evaluation and further development of the model.	Yes
Calvin A. Larson	Headwaters Regional Development Commission	Collaborate on tailoring of resources for local needs and opportunities; lead direct business engagement and technical assistance in HRDC's service territory; assist with program evaluation and further development of the model.	Yes
Ryan Krueger	EnerChange	Conduct energy assessments for nonprofits.	Yes
Kelsey Klucas	Minnesota Technical Assistance Program (MnTAP) / University of Minnesota	Provide technical expertise for resource development; conduct in-depth energy and water assessments/process analyses at small- to medium-sized industrial facilities.	Yes
Diana McKeown	CERTs / Great Plains Institute	Serve as a liaison between this project and the Small Business Equitable Energy Decarbonization Initiative (SBEEDI) project in the metro, collaborating on resources and sharing lessons learned.	No
Blaine Chaulklin	Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association	Collaborate on identifying synergies between project objectives and municipal utilities' programs; strengthen relationships across project partners, Minnesota's municipal utilities, and their business and nonprofit customers.	No
Darrick Moe	Minnesota Rural Electric Association	Collaborate on identifying synergies between project objectives and electric cooperatives' programs; strengthen relationships across project partners, Minnesota's rural electric cooperatives, and their business and nonprofit customers.	No
Andres Salinas	Latino Economic Development Center	Collaborate on tailoring of resources for needs and opportunities of Latino-owned businesses; lead direct engagement and technical assistance for Latino-owned businesses; assist with program evaluation and further development of the model.	Yes
Beth Ann Teskey	Arrowhead Regional Development Commission	Collaborate on tailoring of resources for local needs and opportunities; lead direct business engagement and technical assistance in ARDC's service territory; assist with program evaluation and further development of the model.	Yes
Anna Carlson	Bemidji State University - Center for Empowered Communities	Collaborate on tailoring of resources for local needs and opportunities; support direct business engagement and technical assistance in northern Minnesota; assist with program evaluation and further development of the model; provide clean energy learning opportunities for students.	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?

Through this project, we hope to make it easier for clean energy to be an everyday part of the assistance provided by RDOs, CBOs, utilities, and other entities across the state by:

- * Developing locally relevant tools and resources;
- * Building partner familiarity with clean energy opportunities;
- * Strengthening communication across the network; and
- * Identifying, implementing, and sharing best practices for providing clean energy assistance.

These benefits will not disappear at the end of this project. Future efforts could be funded in a variety of ways: community foundations, utility ECO spending, or, ideally, regularly integrating energy into other – more general – technical assistance programs.

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Melissa Birch

Job Title: Co-Director, Clean Energy Resource Teams

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

Dr. Melissa Birch has been with the Clean Energy Resource Teams for seven years. Prior to that she worked in the education, natural resource, and nonprofit sectors, and she earned a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School at Tufts University, where she focused on the intersection between economic development, environment, and civic engagement.

During her time at CERTs, she has strengthened relationships and collaborated on initiatives with a wide range of partners and stakeholders, including local and Tribal governments, regional development organizations, entities representing the business and agricultural sectors, electric utilities, community-based organizations, and educational institutions. Prior to taking on the co-director position, she served as CERTs' rural energy development manager, directly assisting rural small businesses and agricultural producers with their efficiency and renewable energy projects.

In her current role, she serves as the primary manager of CERTs' budgets, supervises staff and contractors, and leads program development and implementation for CERTs' rural business, renewable energy, and Community Energy Ambassadors programming, as well as reporting and evaluation efforts. She is, therefore, well positioned to manage the partnerships and oversee the workflow, budgets, reporting, and evaluation for this project, as well as to provide overall vision and direction for the initiative.

Dr. Birch grew up in and currently lives in north-central Minnesota.

Organization: U of MN - Extension Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships

Organization Description:

The CERTs partnership includes the University of Minnesota Extension's Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships (applicant), the Southwest Regional Development Commission (funded partner), the Great Plains Institute (providing in-kind), and the Department of Commerce. For over 20 years, CERTs has provided reliable clean energy information and assistance, developed relationships and collaborations with diverse stakeholders, and engaged communities on energy efficiency and renewable energy. CERTs has regional staff and stakeholder steering committees in each of CERTs' seven regions, supported by statewide staff.

"The clean energy resource teams (CERT's) project is an innovative state, university, and nonprofit partnership that serves as a catalyst for community energy planning and projects. The mission of CERT's is to give citizens a voice in the energy planning process by connecting them with the necessary technical resources to identify and implement community-scale renewable energy and energy efficiency projects." (216C.385)

Some past CERTs business-serving collaborations have included partnering with local utilities to advance energy efficiency, and with local Chambers of Commerce, EDAs, and numerous other local and regional partners to help businesses and nonprofits access clean energy funding and affordable financing. During 2022-2024, for instance, CERTs helped 66 Greater Minnesota businesses and nonprofits complete clean energy projects.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
CERTs Co-Director / PI		Project management			37%	0.3		\$43,815
CERTs Co-Director		Lead direct outreach and engagement efforts			37%	0.3		\$45,060
CERTs Regional Coordinator (Central Region)		Provide direct assistance to businesses and nonprofits in Central and West Central CERTs regions			32%	1.5		\$134,022
CERTs Public Sector Engagement Manager		Lead funding and financing engagement efforts and assistance			37%	1.35		\$166,034
CERTs Regional Coordinator (Northwest)		Provide direct assistance to businesses and nonprofits in the Northwest CERTs region			32%	0.75		\$67,012
CERTs Communications and Engagement Manager		Lead communications components of the project			37%	0.45		\$59,725
CERTs Evaluation Manager		Lead project evaluation			32%	0.3		\$30,382
MnTAP Director / Engineer		Lead MnTAP's work on industrial assessments			37%	0.03		\$5,660
MnTAP Senior Engineer		Technical expert and contributor to industrial assessments			37%	0.06		\$8,538
2 MnTAP Engineers		Technical contributors to industrial assessments			32%	0.27		\$27,652
MnTAP Associate Engineer		Technical contributor to industrial assessments			32%	0.03		\$2,100
							Sub Total	\$590,000
Contracts and Services								
Southwest Regional	Service Contract	Collaborate on resource development; coordinate project efforts and provide direct assistance in				1.5		\$205,000

Development Commission		southern Minnesota. Personnel: \$200,000. Travel: \$5,000.						
TBD	Service Contract	Renewable energy assessments; other technical assistance to businesses and nonprofits as needed.				1.2		\$99,000
TBD	Service Contract	Print design for outreach and assistance materials.				0.02		\$2,700
TBD	Service Contract	Translation of outreach and assistance materials into relevant languages.				0.03		\$3,000
TBD	Service Contract	Web design for business and nonprofit resource page.				0.03		\$4,000
EnerChange	Service Contract	Energy audits for nonprofits. Personnel: \$48,000; Travel: \$32,000.				0.36		\$80,000
TBD	Service Contract	Energy audits for small businesses. Personnel: \$155,000; Travel: \$25,000.				0.75		\$180,000
Headwaters Regional Development Commission	Service Contract	Collaborate on resource development; provide direct assistance to businesses in HRDC's service territory. Personnel: \$225,000.				1.5		\$225,000
Bemidji State University	Service Contract	Provide direct assistance to businesses and nonprofits in northern Minnesota. Personnel: \$22,500 (faculty/staff); \$46,800 (students).				1.41		\$69,300
Latino Economic Development Center	Service Contract	Collaborate on resource development; provide direct assistance to Latino-owned businesses across Greater Minnesota. Personnel: \$270,000.				3		\$270,000
Arrowhead Regional Development Commission	Service Contract	Collaborate on resource development; provide direct assistance to businesses in ARDC's service territory. Personnel: \$145,000; Travel: \$5,000.				0.9		\$150,000
							Sub Total	\$1,288,000
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
							Sub Total	-
Capital Expenditures								
							Sub Total	-
Acquisitions and Stewardship								

							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	MnTAP: 16 trips (10 overnight), 2 people each, averaging 285 miles (\$0.70/mile)	Site visits for industrial energy and water assessments					\$6,000
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	CERTs: 52 trips (20 overnight), 1-2 people each, averaging 300 miles (\$0.70/mile).	Engage and assist small businesses and nonprofits.					\$14,000
							Sub Total	\$20,000
Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-
Printing and Publication								
	Printing	4000 handouts/info sheets	Handouts for outreach and informational sheets for assistance					\$2,000
							Sub Total	\$2,000
Other Expenses								
							Sub Total	-
							Grand Total	\$1,900,000

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				
			Non State Sub Total	-
			Funds Total	-

Total Project Cost: \$1,900,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [90c79ccf-f44.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

Empowering Small Business Energy Savings in Greater Minnesota: A replicable model for scaling up clean energy deployment with small businesses & nonprofits. Proposal led by the Clean Energy Resource Teams. 6 components: Network of partners; resources & partners; business assistance; clean energy projects; storytelling; replicable model. List of 11 partners. Minnesota map....

Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
Letter from U of MN SPA	3757a74c-27c.pdf
Latino Economic Development Center Letter	a21f555a-461.pdf
Arrowhead Regional Development Commission Letter	2dda0981-a60.pdf
Great Plains Institute Letter	acdfba97-d08.docx
EnerChange Letter	a349f85f-74c.pdf
MN Technical Assistance Program Letter	72c9f583-712.pdf
MN Municipal Utilities Association Letter	1039dd54-1a3.pdf
MN Rural Electric Association Letter	82aceb49-859.pdf
Headwaters Regional Development Commission Letter	e686d079-4e7.pdf
Southwest Regional Development Commission Letter	93fc3cb2-b8e.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?

Yes, I understand the UMN Policy on travel 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")?

No

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

Kerry Marsolek (U of MN Extension)

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

