



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2026 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2026-508

Proposal Title: Climate-Smart Counties and Communities: Collaborative Resiliency Solutions

Project Manager Information

Name: Sabine Engel

Organization: U of MN - Institute on the Environment

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Project Basic Information

Project Summary: This project proposes a novel way to help rural and small communities and counties across Minnesota develop and implement locally-driven resiliency plans that tap world-class expertise in Minnesota and Germany.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$975,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2029

LCCMR Funding Category: Resiliency (A)

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?

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

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.

Rural counties and small communities in Minnesota face increasing challenges in building resilience to climate change and adapting to a shifting energy landscape. Historically, energy production in Minnesota has been centralized, leaving local governments with limited experience in managing decentralized renewable energy infrastructure. Decision-making on land use for these new energy systems lies with county boards, whose members often lack technical expertise in climate resilience and sustainable energy. This gap in knowledge, combined with the absence of established best practices for county-community-private sector collaboration, impedes local governments from effectively planning and implementing sustainable solutions.

Financial constraints further exacerbate the problem, particularly in rural areas where counties and communities struggle with limited resources. Many lack the capacity to hire dedicated personnel with expertise in climate adaptation, renewable energy, and sustainability planning. Without adequate technical support, local governments remain reactive rather than proactive, making it difficult to seize opportunities for innovation or leverage external expertise effectively. This capacity gap leaves Minnesota's rural communities vulnerable to climate-related disruptions.

To address these challenges, new cooperative models are needed that encourage knowledge-sharing and joint problem-solving.

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 empower Minnesota's counties and communities in developing climate resilience, this project fosters collaboration among counties and communities—and integrates expertise from Germany's sustainability initiatives—to develop actionable solutions and accelerate resiliency efforts. Supporting municipalities and businesses with short-term in-house renewable energy technical expertise is designed to bridge the expertise gap and empower communities to develop forward-thinking resiliency strategies.

Key components:

Regular Virtual Technical Meetings: Virtual meetings will connect experts and stakeholders from Minnesota and North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) to discuss current resiliency barriers and present concrete solutions. The approach facilitates continuous learning and adaptation. To overcome language barriers, simultaneous interpretation services will be provided.

Resiliency Technical Services: Municipalities and private sector businesses will be able to request funding to hire technical experts focused on renewable energy, environmental engineering, and/or sustainability to develop resiliency plans or implement solutions.

Annual Workshops: These 2-day workshops serve as collaborative platforms, bringing together 25-40 county and community representatives from Minnesota and technical experts from Germany. Participants will share experiences and co-create actionable solutions tailored to local contexts. The workshops stand to produce a range of model approaches that will inspire counties and communities across Minnesota.

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 aligns with the LCCMR's resiliency funding priorities by delivering these outcomes:

-Local Climate Resiliency Plans Development: Collaboratively create tailored resiliency and adaptation strategies for

Minnesota counties and communities

- Educational Programs on Climate Adaptation: Offer education, outreach, and technical assistance to broaden understanding and implementation of effective climate adaptation management practices among landowners
- Research on Climate Change Solutions: Access world-class research in Minnesota and Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia to develop comprehensive and viable solutions for reducing the impacts of climate change in Minnesota
- Establishment of Collaborative Networks: Create networks to share and learn about new and innovative practices

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Virtual Technical Meetings to Connect Stakeholders and Experts, Address Resiliency Barriers, and Identify Actionable Solutions

Activity Budget: \$162,000

Activity Description:

Community leaders and connected stakeholders need to develop a deeper understanding of resiliency measures and how they are interconnected to achieve resilience objectives. To ensure cost-effective waste management and environmental protection, counties benefit from greater knowledge of renewable energy and resource potential. The team will host nine virtual technical 90-minute meetings per year, similar to the Climate Smart Municipalities program meeting design, to allow participants and subject matter experts to access the latest solutions on these issues and develop measures that will fit the distinct profile of their community. The meetings will be promoted using newsletters and a project website and be structured to be interactive and engaging, pairing integrative technical solutions with an information exchange between project participants. Technical information will be summarized in fact sheets and circulated after each meeting. The virtual format ensures efficiency and access across Minnesota. An interpreter (in-kind) will ensure that technical expertise available in Germany will be fully accessible to Minnesotan participants. These meetings will be the backbone for a statewide collaborative network of counties, communities, and businesses that want to lead on resiliency measures and hope to inspire others. We will track participation and engagement to assess program impact.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
organize and host 9 virtual meetings per year with technical experts and active participation	June 30, 2027
organize and host 9 virtual meetings per year with technical experts and active participation	June 30, 2028
organize and host 9 virtual meetings per year with technical experts and active participation	June 30, 2029

Activity 2: Resiliency Technical Services to Support Local Resiliency Project Development and Implementation

Activity Budget: \$432,000

Activity Description:

Municipalities and businesses can request funding to hire technical experts (\$18k per project; 5/year) focused on renewable energy, environmental engineering, and/or sustainability to develop tailored resiliency plans or implement a resilience project. This activity will focus on rural areas as they often lack the staff and access to new technical expertise to develop their specific resiliency solution. The temporary technical experts or appropriately skilled student interns will devote 32 hours/week for five months to each project. The project PI and co-PI will work with interested Minnesota communities to identify a specific resiliency issue, find an expert or intern, and develop a work plan. Participating communities or private-sector entities will be required to commit staff time for mentoring and continuous project engagement. They will also be asked to arrange for at least one in-house presentation on approaches and/or results. They will be invited to share their specific resiliency plan or project at one of the regular virtual meetings to ensure dissemination and optimal collaborative learning. Their projects will be summarized and shared through the website and newsletter. The impact of the project and in-kind contributions of these entities will be assessed and reported after each completed project.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
5 Minnesota municipalities or businesses with completed resiliency plans or projects in year 1	June 30, 2027
5 Minnesota municipalities or businesses with completed resiliency plans or projects in year 2	June 30, 2028
5 Minnesota municipalities or businesses with completed resiliency plans or projects in year 3	June 30, 2029

Activity 3: Annual Workshop with Community Representatives and Technical Experts to Co-Create Actionable Solutions Tailored to Local Contexts

Activity Budget: \$381,000

Activity Description:

These 2-day workshops serve as collaborative platforms, bringing together 25-40 county, community, and business representatives from Minnesota and technical experts from Germany. Participants will share experiences and co-create actionable solutions tailored to local contexts. The workshops stand to produce a range of model approaches that will inspire counties and communities across Minnesota. By partnering with German experts from North-Rhine Westphalia, Minnesota county and community leaders can collaboratively learn from Germany's initiatives, accelerating Minnesota resiliency efforts. A facilitator will ensure a smooth and effective meeting. Results of the workshop will be made available on the project website and highlighted in newsletters, social media, and shareable fact sheets or videos. Efforts will be made to ensure the participation of the counties' and municipalities' legislators. The project's communications expert will ensure timely and specific outreach through the website, newsletter, and collaboration with representatives of different stakeholder groups who can distribute prepared communications. Participants will receive an honorarium to ensure broad participation, consistent with LCCMR fund expectations. As the annual capstone activity, we will evaluate the effectiveness of annual activities after the workshop through an evaluation questionnaire and interviews with key participants to improve and shape future programming.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
2-day workshop "MN Collaborative Resiliency Solutions 2027"	June 30, 2027
2-day workshop "MN Collaborative Resiliency Solutions 2028"	June 30, 2028
2-day workshop "MN Collaborative Resiliency Solutions 2029"	June 30, 2029

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Troy Goodnough	University of Minnesota	Co-Principal Investigator	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?

Ensuring the long-term implementation and financing of the project's results requires strategic institutionalization and funding mechanisms. By embedding climate resiliency strategies into county policies and planning frameworks, local governments can sustain resiliency efforts beyond the project's duration. Regular knowledge-sharing through established regional networks (e.g. Association of MN Counties, MN Inter-County Association, League of MN Cities) will maintain momentum and facilitate adaptation to evolving challenges. One immediate tool for advancing and anchoring a resiliency mindset and ensuring sustainable investments is for counties to create a dedicated resiliency/sustainability officer position to help the county's communities and businesses.

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Sabine Engel

Job Title: Program Director of International Partnerships

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

Dr. Engel directs the international partnerships program at the University of Minnesota's Institute on the Environment. She is well known in Minnesota for her impactful work on clean energy, community resilience, and sustainability as well as her ability to leverage university and international expertise for the benefit of Minnesota leaders. Her responsibilities at the University of Minnesota position her well to successfully manage the proposed multi-partner collaborative project.

Most relevant to the current application, Dr. Engel created the binational platform "Climate-Smart Municipalities: Modeling Integrated Energy Communities for the 21st Century— NRW and Minnesota" (CSM)

[<https://www.climatesmart-mn.org/>] with start-up funding by Germany's federal government and matching funds from Minnesota entities. The CSM platform has allowed the five original city partners to measurably advance local climate work and assume model character for numerous other MN communities. The City of Morris developed its nationally-recognized "Morris Model" initiative. The City of Duluth created its first sustainability officer position. The City of Rochester re-envisioned its power and heat strategies. The City of Warren developed a novel approach to help homeowners increase energy efficiency via the use of drone surveys. CSM puts a special focus on rural communities. Since the expiration of the German start-up funding, the CSM platform has grown to include additional rural communities as partners, including the communities of St. Cloud, St. James, Comfrey, and New Ulm and piqued interest with their counties. In September 2024, the Climate-Smart Municipalities team was honored with the inaugural annual achievement award of the National Sustainability Society.

Dr. Engel also organizes a longstanding bipartisan energy and climate policy exchange between Minnesota and Germany, which since its start in 2011 has helped annual groups of Minnesota leaders experience and assess Germany's dynamic energy transformation and collaborate on innovative energy policy legislation.

Organization: U of MN - Institute on the Environment

Organization Description:

The University of Minnesota's Institute on the Environment (UMN IonE) is a unit under the Research Innovation Office

that advances interdisciplinary sustainability research, learning and development, and strategic communications across the 5 UMN campuses. With a network of 300+ affiliated faculty and research professionals, the Institute on the Environment is an internationally recognized leader in collaborating with local to global governments, businesses, and natural resources organizations to solve sustainability challenges.

IonE has a track record of working with external partners through collaborative research, external sales, and spin-off ventures in support of MN government, industry, and corporate innovation – offering climate resilience expertise in clean energy, supply chain analysis, global data sets, agro-food systems, greenhouse gas emissions, and decision science and indicators. IonE supports workforce and leadership development across all ages and career stages, including professional/practitioner offerings, and hosts several forums to scope future needs and collaboration opportunities, including the Midwest Carbon Leadership Project and the Climate Smart Municipalities project.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
Principal Investigator		will be task leader, will oversee the direction of all aspects of the program, will supervise project staff and contracts to achieve the project outcomes			36.6%	1.98		\$356,639
Co-Principal Investigator		will lead and support technical services and resiliency projects, will provide mentorship to project teams, will collaborate with PI on technical content for workshops and meetings			36.6%	0.6		\$78,262
Communications Specialist		will support communication design strategy associated with the project, including development of internal communications (e.g. newsletters) for project participants and external communications for the public (e.g. website content, articles, video/digital content)			32.3%	0.6		\$56,931
Research Project Manager		will support project team planning, engagement and coordination, contract management, progress tracking, and reporting			32.3%	0.6		\$48,168
							Sub Total	\$540,000
Contracts and Services								
TBD	Service Contract	Facilitator will guide discussions, ensure participation, manage time, and help the group achieve goals of the annual 2-day workshop by fostering collaboration.				0.06		\$24,000
TBD	Service Contract	Deploy service contracts to support Minnesota municipalities or businesses to fund resiliency projects (5 contracts/year, 3 years, \$18,000/contract). These projects will require technical services from engineering interns that this contract will support. The contracts would have specific deliverables such as a resiliency plan.				4.5		\$270,000
							Sub Total	\$294,000
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								

							Sub Total	-
Capital Expenditures								
							Sub Total	-
Acquisitions and Stewardship								
							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	4 project personnel will travel approximately 100-350 miles 1 time per year at a rate of \$750 per person per trip	4 project personnel will travel within Minnesota to host the annual workshop					\$9,000
							Sub Total	\$9,000
Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-
Printing and Publication								
							Sub Total	-
Other Expenses								
		Stipend of \$1,000 per participant for 35 participants to attend 1 workshop per year for 3 years. Stipend will cover their workshop preparation, participation, and follow-up and offset 75% of the cost of attendance.	Compensates Minnesota community leaders for their contribution to and participation in the workshop					\$105,000
		Workshop expenses and space rental for annual in-person workshop at non-metro location (Once per year for 3 years)	The 2-day annual workshop will require meeting space and supplies to host 35 participants, several technical experts, and project personnel.	X				\$27,000
							Sub Total	\$132,000
							Grand Total	\$975,000

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

Category/Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request
Other Expenses		Workshop expenses and space rental for annual in-person workshop at non-metro location (Once per year for 3 years)	Meeting space and supplies will ensure that all participants can attend in-person and engage fully in the workshop. Although we use virtual meetings very effectively for joint learning and quick information exchange elsewhere in the project, the annual workshops are designed to iteratively collaborate in small groups and jointly as the larger 35 member team over the 2 days to produce actionable results. A physical meeting space that is appropriately equipped is essential for that.

Non ENRTF Funds

Category	Specific Source	Use	Status	Amount
State				
			State Sub Total	-
Non-State				
Cash	Funds will be deployed from donor gifts to UMN Institute on the Environment.	For meetings involving technical experts from Germany, language interpretation is necessary as it enables full participation, engagement, and comprehension for all meeting attendees. Interpreters will be funded at a rate of \$125 per hour with expected 112 hours of work required to cover all virtual and in-person meetings per year, for 3 years.	Secured	\$42,000
			Non State Sub Total	\$42,000
			Funds Total	\$42,000

Total Project Cost: \$1,017,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [00501239-97b.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

snapshots collage of a community-led collaborative outreach activity at a recent MN State Fair that captures Minnesotans' desire for local sustainability and, by extension, their interest in collaborating on making their home communities and counties resilient...

Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
U of M signed financial statement 2024	80130c7f-e88.pdf
U of M annual financial report 2024	b09064e6-5e1.pdf
U of M letter authorizing submission	1fddd351-675.pdf
Letter of Support--Olmsted County Commissioner David H. Senjem	5f879d3c-036.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:

Dr. Claire Anderson, research project manager, Institute on the Environment, University of Minnesota

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

