



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2026 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2026-520

Proposal Title: Outdoor Learning Professional Development for Educators and Administrators

Project Manager Information

Name: Peter Smerud

Organization: Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center

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Project Basic Information

Project Summary: Wolf Ridge will provide professional development for educators and administrators throughout Minnesota, enabling them to implement innovative, locally focused outdoor learning at their school.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$325,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2029

LCCMR Funding Category: Education and Outdoor Recreation (C)

Project Location

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

Statewide

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.

While classroom teachers understand the value of real-world learning, many have a hard time shifting from simply learning and playing outdoors to the use of the environment and outdoors as an integrated context for learning. Few teachers have enough expertise with facilitating outdoor learning to be able to naturally implement it into their existing curriculums. They often don't realize that all of their school subjects can be enhanced from being taught outdoors, not just their science lessons. With the introduction of the Minnesota Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act, schools in Minnesota are dedicating the majority of their professional development time and funding into literacy/reading training consequently lacking the opportunities or funding to grow foundational skills in outdoor learning. They often lack administrative support and culture within their schools or districts to be able to implement innovative best practices in outdoor learning. The March 2025 DNR Legislative Report states that barriers to youth outdoor opportunities include "lack of teacher training and professional development..." and "lack of buy-in from administration and administrative support." Culture changes in schools and districts along with capacity development of teachers and administrators is needed to create systems change for outdoor learning.

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.

Wolf Ridge will provide professional development for teachers and school leaders, and build a collaborative network of support that enhances outdoor learning and create systems changes in schools/ districts of Minnesota. By providing multi-day immersive learning experiences for teachers and school leaders, as well as on-site mentorship and site assessments, teachers and school leaders will increase their capacity to provide innovative, locally focused outdoor learning at their respective schools throughout the state that will exponentially impact Minnesota youth. Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center's teacher training team will host professional development experiences at Wolf Ridge's campus to provide a fully immersive experience for teachers and school leaders and create a statewide network of teachers and administrators to support outdoor learning. Wolf Ridge's team will also travel statewide to provide professional development trainings at schools or other district locations to enhance expertise in priority areas including water, education and outdoor recreation, wildlife, plants, and climate change resiliency. Finally, Wolf Ridge will support these education leaders with on-site mentorship for teachers and site assessments of outdoor learning physical spaces. Recommendations and critical resources will then be provided to schools to enable outcomes and the enhancement of outdoor learning.

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?

An estimated 18,000 Minnesota students statewide will be impacted by this project within the three year span. By raising the capacity of school leaders to provide systems change in their schools and by providing teachers professional development to enhance and strengthen the delivery of their outdoor learning, Minnesota students will continue to receive high quality instruction in educational priority areas including water, education and outdoor recreation, wildlife, plants and climate change resiliency. Teachers and school leaders will continue to deliver foundational knowledge and awareness of emerging threats to Minnesota's environment and natural resources for many years to come.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Statewide Collaborative and Coordinated Community of Teachers

Activity Budget: \$200,000

Activity Description:

According to the March 2025 Minnesota DNR Outdoor Opportunities for Minnesota Youth Legislative Report, a teacher barrier to youth outdoor opportunities is "the lack of teacher training and professional development...". Teacher professional development will be provided to the nine different regions of Minnesota (as defined by Minnesota Science Teachers Association) through multi-day, total immersion programs using an outdoor school model. At Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center, a minimum of 400 teachers will be provided a 3-5 day (20-44 instructional hours) professional development experience. The experience will enhance expertise in educational priorities including water, education and outdoor recreation, wildlife, plants, and climate change resiliency. Wolf Ridge will establish a collaborative and coordinated statewide network empowering teachers to share culturally relevant best practices with ongoing support. Through a network of newly, highly skilled teachers, a statewide exponential impact will occur for Minnesota youth. Teachers will document students impacted by receiving outdoor learning experiences. The network of teachers will provide outdoor learning for an estimated 3,000 new students each year, for a cumulative total of 18,000 students.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Serve 100 teachers in total immersion professional development workshops.	June 30, 2027
Document statewide student contact numbers by trained teachers.	January 31, 2028
Serve an additional 150 teachers in total immersion professional development workshops.	June 30, 2028
Serve an additional 150 teachers in total immersion professional development workshops.	June 30, 2029
Establish a network of skilled outdoor education teachers meeting regularly.	June 30, 2029
Document statewide student contact numbers by trained teachers.	June 30, 2029

Activity 2: Schoolwide Expertise, Innovation, and Capacity Development

Activity Budget: \$49,500

Activity Description:

According to the March 2025 Minnesota DNR Legislative Report, a teacher barrier to youth outdoor opportunities is "the lack of teacher training and professional development...". Teacher professional development will be provided statewide through the outdoor physical spaces at their school or another district chosen location. Fifteen schools (300 teachers) will be provided 4-8 hour professional development experiences. The experience will enhance expertise in educational priorities including water, education and outdoor recreation, wildlife, plants, and climate change resiliency. These innovative, locally focused teaching strategies will leverage resources and newly developed expertise to increase awareness of emerging threats to the environment and natural resources. The increased capacity of these teachers will provide more effective and engaging outdoor learning for an estimated 2,500 new students each year, for a cumulative total of 15,000 students.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Serve 5 schools and 100 teachers with in-service professional development	June 30, 2027
Serve an additional 5 schools and 100 teachers with in-service professional development	June 30, 2028
Serve an additional 5 schools and 100 teachers with in-service professional development	June 30, 2029

Survey and report on enhanced teacher effectiveness and leverage of local resources.	June 30, 2029
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Activity 3: Continuous Improvement Plans for Individual Teachers and Physical Space Effectiveness

Activity Budget: \$49,500

Activity Description:

According to the March 2025 Minnesota DNR Legislative Report, teacher barriers to outdoor learning include limitations on "how to use the outdoors as an active and important learning space." Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center professional teacher trainers will visit schools throughout Minnesota to provide on-site mentorship and site assessment. Direct observation of teachers facilitating outdoor learning with their students will lead to critical, direct feedback and guidance to help enhance and strengthen their practice in place. Site assessments include evaluating the grounds of the respective school with recommendations for site enhancement and development for outdoor learning. Critical resources will be provided for implementation of recommendations. This will raise the capacity of the school to effectively implement outdoor learning. Participating schools will be guided to join the Minnesota DNR School forest program to continue with statewide networking and professional support. Mentoring and coteaching will happen simultaneously thus impacting 3,000 students directly through outdoor learning.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Serve 5 schools (50 teachers, 1,000 students) and with on-site mentorship and site assessment	June 30, 2027
Serve additional 5 schools (50 teachers, 1,000 students) with on-site mentorship and site assessment	June 30, 2028
Serve additional 5 schools (50 teachers, 1,000 students) with on-site mentorship and site assessment	June 30, 2029

Activity 4: Systems Change in School Districts through Principal & Leadership Capacity Development

Activity Budget: \$26,000

Activity Description:

This innovative approach through system change in this activity will create a culture of outdoor learning at respective schools. According to the March 2025 Minnesota DNR Legislative Report, a barrier to youth outdoor opportunities is the "lack of buy-in from administration and administrative support." While empowered teachers may be able to make change at the classroom level, schoolwide system change requires administrative understanding and support. Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center professional teacher trainers and leadership will provide 40 principals and/or school leaders opportunities to participate in total immersion programming at Wolf Ridge, on-site district workshops, and outdoor leadership coaching. This will build their capacity to support and lead their school systems towards a comprehensive outdoor learning team and site. Wolf Ridge will facilitate a statewide networking community, local project partners, and meaningful community engagement.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Serve 10 principals and/or school leaders in capacity development	June 30, 2027
Serve an additional 15 principals and/or school leaders in capacity development	June 30, 2028
Serve an additional 15 principals and/or school leaders in capacity development	June 30, 2029

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Emily Pavlisich	Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center	Program Coordinator	No

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 capacity development of teachers and school leaders, districts that were provided professional development during this project will have the skills and network needed to continue to deliver high quality outdoor learning to Minnesota students. Wolf Ridge will seek additional funding to continue to reach more schools to grow the statewide network of teachers and school leaders.

Other ENRTF Appropriations Awarded in the Last Six Years

Name	Appropriation	Amount Awarded
Increasing Outdoor Learning For Young Minnesotans	M.L. 2021, First Special Session, Chp. 6, Art. 6, Sec. 2, Subd. 05a	\$383,000

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Peter Smerud

Job Title: Executive Director

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

Peter Smerud is the Executive Director and has managed dozens of grants from small to \$2 Million, including previous LCCMR grants. Peter has managed programs at Wolf Ridge, including the graduate student training program and dozens of teacher training initiatives, over his more than 30 years at Wolf Ridge. Emily Pavlisich is the current program coordinator at Wolf Ridge ELC and manages Wolf Ridge's K-12 school program and is primary facilitator for any groups that visit Wolf Ridge. Emily has a Bachelor's Degree in Teaching Life Science through the University of Minnesota Duluth and a Master's of Science in Science Education through Montana State University. Emily, while a former classroom science teacher, also leads Wolf Ridge's Teacher Training Institute and teaches in the Wolf Ridge graduate student and educator training program.

Organization: Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center

Organization Description:

Wolf Ridge ELC is a private non-profit and an accredited school with the mission "To develop citizenry that has the knowledge, skills, motivation, and commitment to work together for a quality environment." The organization has 6 core values which include: leaders in our field, learning & innovation, can-do-attitude, collaborative community, environmental stewards, playful and welcoming. Wolf Ridge educates and inspires a community of environmental stewards through experiential lifelong learning and action in the greatest outdoor classroom. Wolf Ridge hosts groups on our campus for three or five day outdoor learning experiences. These groups range from K-12 school groups, a multi-year graduate student field educator training program, summer camp and adult programs, as well as a teacher training

institute. Wolf Ridge has been providing outdoor learning experiences to participants for 54 years, having served a total of over 750,000 students. One in 10 Minnesotans have experienced learning facilitated by Wolf Ridge.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
							Sub Total	-
Contracts and Services								
							Sub Total	-
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
	Equipment	(Activity 2, 3 and 4) Equipment for Wolf Ridge instructors	Field learning tools and supplies for studies during Wolf Ridge programming					\$3,000
	Tools and Supplies	(Activity 2 and 3) Critical resources for outdoor learning, 30 schools, \$400 value per school	Assets provided to schools to enable execution of outdoor learning					\$12,000
							Sub Total	\$15,000
Capital Expenditures								
							Sub Total	-
Acquisitions and Stewardship								
							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	(Activity 2 and 3), 30 trips, estimated 13,200 miles, 2 Wolf Ridge employees, 5 meals per person per trip, lodging	Statewide travel to schools in the different regions of Minnesota.					\$25,000
							Sub Total	\$25,000
Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-

Printing and Publication								
							Sub Total	-
Other Expenses								
		(Activity 1) Teacher Training at Wolf Ridge	Multiday total immersion trainings held at Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center for 300 teachers.					\$200,000
		(Activity 2) Programming cost, 2 Wolf Ridge staff labor for 15 school trainings	15 one day trainings at \$2,000 per school					\$30,000
		(Activity 3) Programming cost, 2 Wolf Ridge staff labor for 15 faculty mentoring and site assessment at respective schools	15 one day sessions at \$2,000 per school					\$30,000
		(Activity 4) Programming cost	On-site and Wolf Ridge immersion trainings for principals and school leaders					\$25,000
							Sub Total	\$285,000
							Grand Total	\$325,000

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: \$325,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [3e6181f9-a6b.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

A map of Minnesota with 9 different regions outlined by county. Regions include Northwest, Northeast, West Central, East Central, Central, South West, South Central, South East, and Metro....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
MN Secretary of State, nonprofit business filling, active, 3-2025	094466f8-e54.pdf
WRELC 2023-24 Financial Audit	71ba7afc-214.pdf
WRELC 2024 990 tax return	1b23c60b-11c.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
WRELC Board Support Letter, 2026 LCCMR App	52ed0e66-249.pdf

Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
2025 MN DNR Legislative Report on Outdoor Opportunities for MN Youth	71cf4640-84b.pdf
Letter of Support from Dr. Cathy Kindem, Oak Ridge Elementary Principal	158ccce7-085.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 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")?

No

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

Peter Smerud, Emily Pavlisich, Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center

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