



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2026 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2026-559

Proposal Title: Emerging Conservation Leaders - Expanding the Network

Project Manager Information

Name: Neal Feeken

Organization: Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Trust Inc

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Project Basic Information

Project Summary: Project will annually introduce up to 10,000 metro area youth to the outdoors and the conservation profession through the convening and facilitation of a unique network of partner organizations.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$850,000

Proposed Project Completion: August 31, 2029

LCCMR Funding Category: Education and Outdoor Recreation (C)

Project Location

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

Region(s): Metro

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

Region(s): Metro

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.

Previous ENRTF investment allowed the Minnesota Valley Trust (MVTrust) and Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) to build a model internship and apprenticeship program with a focus on local recruitment of diverse high-school youth and emerging professionals. "Mentoring the Next Generation of Conservation Professionals" offered first-hand participation in educational, stewardship and outdoor recreation experiences both on and off the Refuge. Given its location and varied habitats, the Refuge continues to serve as a learning laboratory for future conservationists and environmental educators.

All 21 of interns and apprentices who participated in the "Mentoring Program" acquired their Public Lands Certificates and seven have gone on to lead or work with local urban area youth organizations. Several more are currently pursuing graduate studies or are working for conservation organizations across the country. This robust alumni network creates an opportunity to leverage our previous work by expanding relationships with those local organizations to address social, economic, or physical barriers to natural resources-based outdoor recreation and introduce thousands of new and underserved youth to the outdoors.

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.

As one of just 14 urban wildlife refuges in the country, the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) works to encourage a myriad of youth to consider conservation careers and ensure a future constituency passionate about protecting and stewarding public lands.

The program will fund one full-time Internship Coordinator (IC) and one Environmental Education Lead (EEL) for a total of three years each. Primary responsibilities for the IC include: coordinate with our newly established alumni network by engaging 7-10 outside organizations in co-developing nature based and introductory recreational curriculums and providing new opportunities for youth to experience nature. They will lead the recruitment, training and mentoring of high-school and college age interns. The EEL will provide guidance and oversight for up to three cohorts of one-year each Education Interns. The program will also support 4 FTE Apprentices specializing in Conservation Biology, Habitat Management, and Visitors Services and Outreach career tracks.

As match, the MVTrust and Refuge will fund 9 one-year term Education Interns. A Refuge funded Community Engagement Manager will provide overall guidance and mentoring for the EEL and IC. Finally, the Refuge will serve as the central location for managing and disseminating resources to the alumni and partnership network.

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?

Leveraging the success of the internship and apprentice model we will continue to create hands-on experiences for young people to explore careers in the conservation field, who, in turn, help the Refuge utilize the resources it stewards to connect thousands of school children to outdoors through its environmental education program. With the addition of the Internship Coordinator and the Environmental Education Lead the refuge will expand its reach considerably as the Refuge builds new partnerships and co-develops nature-based opportunities for more youth to access and compete for post-secondary and employment opportunities.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: 4 Full-Time Apprentices will gain hands-on experience in Conservation Biology, Habitat Management, Visitor Services and Community Outreach

Activity Budget: \$453,000

Activity Description:

Four recent graduates from a diversity of backgrounds will have full-time paid apprenticeships at the Minnesota Valley NWR (Refuge) for 2 years each and be integrated into the Refuge team through mentorship and supervision from the IC. In addition to participating in biological monitoring, habitat restoration and enhancement, community engagement, and public programming apprentices will be integral to expanding the network with youth conservation organizations. With support from the Community Engagement Manager and the IC Apprentices will gain invaluable hands-on leadership and career development skills by serving as partnership liaisons, facilitating programming and serving as mentors for youth from new Refuge audiences. The Apprentices will be paid a wage comparable to an entry-level position on the federal GS scale for this market, provided a full range of benefits and covered by workers compensation. Their development and training plan will be designed to enable them to successfully compete for a federal GS-7 level position upon completion of their apprenticeship. In addition, a Public Lands Corp certificate will provide preferential status in the federal hiring process.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Apprentices participate in 9 annual developmental workshops to explore conservation careers and build new skills	June 30, 2028
Biology Apprentice 1 completes rotation	June 30, 2028
Visitor Services Apprentice 1 completes rotation	June 30, 2028
Apprentices complete general and specific USFWS trainings and attend the USFWS Regional Intern Workshop	July 31, 2028
Apprentices complete cross-program job shadows and more specialized trainings geared toward their career objectives	May 31, 2029
Apprentices co-lead plant and wildlife surveys, habitat plans, nature-based and recreational programs and special events.	June 30, 2029
Biology Apprentice 2 Completes rotation	June 30, 2029
Visitors Services Apprentice 2 completes rotation	June 30, 2029

Activity 2: Environmental Educator Leads develop and direct youth programming

Activity Budget: \$167,000

Activity Description:

Three each Environmental Educator Leads will complete one-year terms of service with the Refuge. During their tenure they will work closely with Refuge staff to develop and implement youth environmental programming. As a component of their professional development they will be asked to co-supervise college age Educational Interns and high-school DUCKS program interns.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Environmental Education Lead #1 completes year 1	June 30, 2027
Environmental Education Lead #2 completes year 2	June 30, 2028
Environmental Education Lead #3 completes Year 3	June 30, 2029

Environmental Education Leads develop and lead cohorts of Education Interns	June 30, 2029
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Activity 3: Intern Coordinator convenes and facilitates partner relationships

Activity Budget: \$230,000

Activity Description:

The Intern Coordinator will capitalize on the previously established "Mentoring The Next Generation of Conservation Professionals" alumni network to build and strengthen relationships with 7-10 youth serving organizations. They will build their own leadership skills by recruiting, training and mentoring Outreach and Conservation Apprentices and Education Interns sufficient to reach approximately 10,000 area youth with innovative and hands-on learning opportunities. They will seek to expand relationships with traditionally underserved youth communities by establishing relationships with new and nontraditional conservation partners.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Intern Coordinator recruits and onboards first cohort of Education Interns	August 31, 2026
Intern Coordinator recruits and onboards second cohort of Education interns	June 30, 2027
Intern Coordinator recruits and onboards third cohort of Education Interns	June 30, 2028
Intern Coordinator completes three year term of Service	June 30, 2029
Programming and outdoor opportunities co-developed and delivered to approximately 30,000 youth over program lifespan	June 30, 2029
Partnerships serve 7-10 youth service organizations.	June 30, 2029

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Christopher Dunham	Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge & Wetland Management District	Supervise, support and engage the Intern Coordinator, Environmental Education Lead, Interns, and Apprentices to design and deliver environmental education programs, plan and co-lead wildlife interpretive and nature-based activities, assist US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) personnel with habitat restoration and enhancement, conduct biological surveys, improve visitor facilities, and explore conservation-related careers	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?

The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Trust and Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge are committed to maintaining this robust internship and apprenticeship program for the long-term. Further, we are committed to maintaining and growing the burgeoning alumni network founded through this approach. We will continue to seek future funding through philanthropic efforts with foundations, corporations, civic organizations and individuals by the Trust and Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends, as well as through other state and federal sources of funds.

Other ENRTF Appropriations Awarded in the Last Six Years

Name	Appropriation	Amount Awarded
Metro Conservation Corridors Phase VIII - Priority Expansion of Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge	M.L. 2015, Chp. 76, Sec. 2, Subd. 09g	\$500,000
Mentoring the Next Generation of Conservation Professionals	M.L. 2021, First Special Session, Chp. 6, Art. 5, Sec. 2, Subd. 05d	\$500,000
Mentoring Next Generation of Conservation Professionals - Phase 2	M.L. 2024, , Chp. 83, Art. , Sec. 2, Subd. 05g	\$793,000

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Neal Feeken

Job Title: Executive Director

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

Neal Feeken joined the MN Valley Trust as its Executive Director in December of 2025. He brings more than 25 years of conservation experience and organizational management to the Trust. He has extensive experience developing and implementing large-scale conservation projects using state, federal and private funds. His most recent experience included 15 years as the Protect Lands & Waters Lead for The Nature Conservancy in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. Prior to that he served as the Assistant Central Regional Director for the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation based in Minneapolis. Early career experiences include several years as the District Manager for the Watonwan and Chisago Soil & Water Conservation Districts. Neal has a B.S. degree in Wildlife & Fisheries Science from South Dakota State University and a M.A. in Nonprofit Management from Hamline University in St. Paul. Select past board service includes Co-Chair for the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture Management Board; member of the MN Prairie

Plan Committee; MN Prairie Chicken Society Board of Directors, and the MN Invasive Terrestrial Plants and Pests Center Advisory Committee.

Organization: Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Trust Inc

Organization Description:

The Minnesota Valley Trust, Inc. is a 501c3 nonprofit corporation that assists the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in making the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District a premier urban wildlife refuge that:

- Protects, restores, and enhances large blocks and corridors of habitat to provide sustainable landscapes for people and wildlife and improve water quality in the Minnesota River
- Provides opportunities for Twin Cities residents to access the Refuge and connect with wildlife, plants and the Minnesota River in a diversity of ways meaningful to them
- Increases connections with a diversity of residents in the Twin Cities through outreach programming that meets residents of all ages and backgrounds in their communities, introduces them to the natural world and draws them to visit and experience the Refuge themselves
- Engages a diversity of people as volunteers, interns and employees to improve Refuge habitat, meet Refuge educational objectives and build a conservation ethic throughout the community
- Introduces children to the wonders of the natural outdoors through educational and interpretive programming, thereby building a pool of future conservationists, employees, volunteers, advocates and philanthropists.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
Apprentices in Conservation Biology, Habitat Management and Visitor Services and Outreach		4 Apprentices from a diversity of backgrounds will work alongside and learn from Refuge professionals for 2 years in the fields of conservation biology, visitor services and outreach.			24%	8.01		\$453,000
Environmental Education Lead		1 FTE Environmental Education Lead per year. Mentor and oversee Education Interns			24%	3		\$167,000
Internship Coordinator		1 FTE Internship Coordinator. Convene and facilitate partnerships with external youth organizations. Recruit, train and coordinate Apprentices and Interns			24%	3		\$230,000
							Sub Total	\$850,000
Contracts and Services								
							Sub Total	-
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								
							Sub Total	-
							Grand Total	\$850,000

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				
Cash	Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Trust, Inc.	The Minnesota Valley Trust and Refuge will fund 100% of the Environmental Educator Intern cohort (9FTE's total).	Secured	\$419,000
In-Kind	US Fish & Wildlife Service, Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge & Wetland Management District	The Refuge will provide office space, equipment, local travel and supplies for all interns and apprentices.	Secured	\$60,000
In-Kind	US Fish & Wildlife Service, Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District	Refuge will fund 100% of a Community Engagement Manager who will provide overall project oversight, and recruit, train and supervise the Intern Coordinator.	Secured	\$217,350
			Non State Sub Total	\$696,350
			Funds Total	\$696,350

Total Project Cost: \$1,546,350

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [6d43ef98-34d.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

The attachment is a map showing the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District boundaries and units....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
MVT audited financials	74742543-9d6.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
MVT Resolution	b539907a-d34.pdf

Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
Garrison LOS	4cdd5bb3-724.pdf
MS WMO Support Letter	f8c9dcff-ff0.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?

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?

No

Does your project include the pre-design, design, construction, or renovation of a building, trail, campground, or other fixed capital asset costing \$10,000 or more or large-scale stream or wetland restoration?

No

Do you propose using an appropriation from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund to conduct a project that provides children's services (as defined in Minnesota Statutes section 299C.61 Subd.7 as "the provision of care, treatment, education, training, instruction, or recreation to children")?

Yes

Do you certify that background checks are performed for background check crimes, as defined in Minnesota Statutes, section 299C.61, Subd. 2, on all employees, contractors, and volunteers who have or may have access to a child to whom children's services are provided by your organization?

Yes

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

Christopher Dunham, US Fish & Wildlife Service; Kara Zwickey, US Fish & Wildlife Service

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