



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2027 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2027-074

Proposal Title: Jay C. Hormel Supplemental Teaching Staff

Project Manager Information

Name: Luke Reese

Organization: City of Austin

Office Telephone: (507) 437-9974

Email: luke.reese@hormelnaturecenter.org

Project Basic Information

Project Summary: This project maintains impactful and engaging environmental education to students outside of Austin, providing access to outdoor programming that is in line with Minnesota state science standards.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$397,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2030

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): SE

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

Region(s): SE, SW,

When will the work impact occur?

During the Project

Narrative

Describe the opportunity or problem your proposal seeks to address. Include any relevant background information.

The problem: hands-on environmental education is not accessible to rural communities in sections of southern and southeastern Minnesota. This is primarily due to the proximity of nature centers to these areas, and the cost of transportation and programming that is shouldered either by the schools or the individual students.

For the over 50 years that the City of Austin has owned and operated the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center. A major part of the center's mission has been providing environmental education to local students. In 1970, Austin Public Schools were one of 12 pilot schools in the Minnesota Environmental Education Project. However, the reach of these educational programs was limited to the students in Austin. With the financial support from ENRTF, we have been able to address the lack of environmental education resources in our region of the state since 2021.

The Nature Center has provided high-quality, affordable, and accessible programming to these schools, but cannot continue without proper staffing. Funding to support supplemental teaching staff through the LCCMR grant allows the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center to be the solution to this problem for regional students.

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 Nature Center will continue to foster curiosity and engagement in the natural world with students from over 27 regional schools. Previous ENRTF funding has allowed the Nature Center's outreach to grow from 172 to over 250 school groups per year on average. Outside of Austin classes jumped from 39 to over 120 classes taught. Further, 15 more summer classes were added, a 50% increase. Prior funding has allowed 2,275 children to gain access to environmental educational programming annually. This project is maintained by adding one full-time naturalist for three years and one year-long intern for each of the three years of the grant, to the existing staff of one director, office manager, naturalist/teacher, and intern.

The naturalist and intern will utilize already developed curricula that follow state science standards. Nature Center programming covers a breadth of topics, while adapting to students' needs, ages, and learning levels. Learning opportunities include but are not limited to: nature discovery, using your senses, living vs non-living, plant anatomy, adaptations, astronomy, habitats, outdoor survival, macroinvertebrates, and much more. In addition, we provide opportunities for outdoor activities such as: skiing, canoeing, fishing, rock-climbing, fossil-hunting, and orienteering.

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?

Environmental education is key to developing citizens and leaders who value natural resources. This project provides the Nature Center staffing capacity to serve an additional 2,275 students from over 20 school districts annually and offer 50% more summer programs. Themes of protection, conservation, preservation, and enhancement of the natural world are integrated throughout our curricula and reinforced in the school classroom. Most schools participate across multiple grade levels, allowing these themes to be revisited and deepened. These experiences build lifelong conservation values.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Sustain increased environmental education programming for regional schools and summer classes

Activity Budget: \$397,000

Activity Description:

With continued funding, the Nature Center will educate 270+ school groups each school year, up from 172 before ENRTF funding. At least 120 of these groups are from outside of Austin, up from 39 before ENRTF funding. The additional teaching staff has allowed a 67% increase in total school classes participating, from 172 to 287, reaching approximately 5,700 students annually. Of that 115 class increase, over 80 of those classes were new additions from outside of Austin schools. We are now engaging approximately 2,275 students from outside of Austin annually. We will also maintain a total of 45 summer classes, providing an additional 180 opportunities to explore the natural world each summer, a 50% increase over previous years.

Curricula for school and summer programming have been established in the over 50 years that the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center has been in operation. Current established programs evolve and change to best fit our learners' needs. Based on participation numbers, class offerings are evaluated and adapted to what the needs are for the community in both age range and content for environmental education.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Approximately 25 summer 2027 programs (July-August) providing up to 100 additional youth opportunities	August 31, 2027
90+ non-Austin school classes (approximately 2,275 students); 45 summer programs adding 180 youth opportunities	August 31, 2028
90+ non-Austin school classes (approximately 2,275 students); 45 summer programs adding 180 youth opportunities	August 31, 2029
90+ non-Austin school classes (approximately 2,275 students); 20 summer programs adding 80 youth opportunities	June 30, 2030

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Valerie Sheedy	Mower County	Mower County has been a strong supporter of expanding environmental education to students outside Austin. In addition to prior letters of support, the County is now a formal partner in this proposal and has committed 20% of the total project cost as matching funds.	No
John Schramek	Friends of the Hormel Nature Center	The Friends of the Hormel Nature Center are an indirect partner on this project through their management of the bussing grant as well as long-term support for environmental education at the Nature Center. They fund another year-long and a summer intern annually.	No
Sherri Dankert	The Hormel Foundation	The Hormel Foundation has provided direct financial support for the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center's environmental education programs for over 10 years. The funds keep the student cost low for Mower County students including those visiting because of grant funding. The Foundation has awarded the City of Austin \$50,000.	No

Dissemination

Describe your plans for dissemination, presentation, documentation, or sharing of data, results, samples, physical collections, and other products and how they will follow ENRTF Acknowledgement Requirements and Guidelines.

Dissemination of this award will happen through a variety of channels. In official capacities, we will promote this partnership through local podcasts, reports to our parks and recreation board and city council, and interviews with local news outlets. Additionally, our website and social media will credit receiving awarded funds from the ENRTF through recommendation by the LCCMR. Where appropriate, the ENRTF and LCCMR logo will be used in conjunction with attribution language.

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?

Following project completion, programming will continue through ongoing grant support and strategic partnerships. The City of Austin will maintain its general operational support of the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center; however, costs specifically associated with providing environmental education to non-Austin students will require external funding. We will pursue future state and foundation grants and hope to maintain Mower County as a funding partner. We will also seek additional public and private partners to diversify revenue sources and strengthen long-term sustainability. Findings and curriculum improvements will be incorporated into ongoing programming and future funding proposals.

Other ENRTF Appropriations Awarded in the Last Six Years

Name	Appropriation	Amount Awarded
Jay C. Hormel Nature Center Supplemental Teaching Staff	M.L. 2024, , Chp. 83, Art. , Sec. 2, Subd. 05a	\$410,000

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Luke Reese

Job Title: Nature Center Director

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

Luke Reese has served as Director of the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center since August 2016. In this role, he has successfully administered multiple state-funded grants, including two LCCMR grants, three CPL grants, two GMRPTC grants, and two UCF grants, in addition to numerous local foundation awards. He has shown responsible budget management, keen attention to contract details, accurate reporting, and timely project completion.

Luke successfully applied for and secured ENRTF funds from two prior LCCMR grants that support environmental education programming for students traveling to Austin from surrounding communities. This proposed project would continue a proven model, building on established partnerships and measurable outcomes.

As director, Luke has recruited and supervised a team of professional naturalists who deliver high-quality environmental education programming. He oversees curriculum implementation, staff training, program evaluation, and community partnerships to ensure the Nature Center’s established high-quality programming is consistently delivered.

The Nature Center’s environmental education curriculum has been refined over 50 years and is aligned with Minnesota’s science standards. The long-established curriculum is regularly reviewed and updated with input from educators to reflect changing science standards.

Luke’s experience managing complex grants, supervising professional staff, and sustaining long-term educational programming demonstrates his ability to successfully lead and administer the proposed project.

Organization: City of Austin

Organization Description:

The City of Austin is a regional hub in southeastern Minnesota committed to providing high-quality public services, including parks, recreation, natural resource management, and environmental education. Through its Parks & Recreation Department, the City maintains parks, trails, recreational facilities, and natural areas that enhance quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

The Jay C. Hormel Nature Center operates within the City’s Parks & Recreation Department and serves as the community’s primary environmental education and natural resource facility. The Nature Center manages more than 500 acres of restored prairie, woodlands, and wetlands, along with a modern interpretive center that hosts school programs, public events, and community initiatives.

For over five decades, the Nature Center has delivered environmental education programming to students from Austin and increasingly, with ENRTF support, surrounding communities. With professional naturalists on staff, established curriculum, and strong partnerships with local and regional schools, the organization combines municipal accountability with educational expertise. As a city-operated facility, the Nature Center maintains strong fiscal oversight, transparent governance, and long-term sustainability while advancing conservation, outdoor recreation, and environmental literacy across the region.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
80% Outreach Teacher/Naturalist		Schedules and recruits non-Austin schools. Maintains relationships built over two 3-year grant cycles. Teaches students PreK - 8th grade curricula as well as summer programs.			23%	2.4		\$270,700
80% Intern Year 1		This intern supports the program from July 2027 - June 2028 by providing additional capacity to provide the environmental education opportunities to non-Austin students. Interns are limited to 1-year experiences and new interns are selected for subsequent years.			33%	0.8		\$40,600
80% Intern Year 2		This intern supports the program from July 2028 - June 2029 by providing additional capacity to provide the environmental education opportunities to non-Austin students. Interns are limited to 1-year experiences and new interns are selected for subsequent years.			33%	0.8		\$42,125
80% Intern Year 3		This intern supports the program from July 2029 - June 2030 by providing additional capacity to provide the environmental education opportunities to non-Austin students. Interns are limited to 1-year experiences and new interns are selected for subsequent years.			33%	0.8		\$43,575
							Sub Total	\$397,000
Contracts and Services								
							Sub Total	-
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
							Sub Total	-
Capital Equipment								
							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	\$397,000

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				
Cash	Mower County	20% of the Total Personnel Costs (\$496,000)	Secured	\$99,000
Cash	Austin Eagles	Bussing grant funds hosted by the Friends of the Hormel Nature Center	Secured	\$7,500
Cash	City of Austin	Grant administration and supervision (10% of Director's time) x 3 years	Secured	\$48,000
Cash	City of Austin	Supplies July 2027 - June 2030	Pending	\$4,000
			Non State Sub Total	\$158,500
			Funds Total	\$158,500

Total Project Cost: \$555,500

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [ab1ed361-5be.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

Visual Component: Three images of students partaking in outdoor learning. Text describing the total increases in outreach: total school classes- 67%; outside of Austin classes- 218%; Summer Classes- 50%. Three testimonials from teachers, along with a map and list highlighting regional schools participating in educational programming at the nature center....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
City of Austin 2024 Audit Report with Executive Summary	0b24e47b-ffa.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
City Resolution	f4bbde31-ca4.pdf

Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
Mower County Match Support Letter	89875366-43b.pdf
Friends Letter of Support	1a118930-ea3.pdf
Letters of Support: Regional Educators & Community	1f290577-d77.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:

Luke Reese - City of Austin, Jay C. Hormel Nature 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