



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2027 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2027-466

Proposal Title: Reconnecting Sawmill Creek: Climate-Resilient Access for Learning

Project Manager Information

Name: Peter Smerud

Organization: Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center

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Project Basic Information

Project Summary: Wolf Ridge will design and construct a climate-resilient bridge and boardwalk over Sawmill Creek, ensuring safe access for a public angling easement and enabling ongoing habitat stewardship and environmental education.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$409,000

Proposed Project Completion: December 31, 2028

LCCMR Funding Category: Resiliency (A)

Project Location

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

Region(s): NE

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.

Sawmill Creek is a tributary of the Baptism River running through Wolf Ridge's 2,000-acre campus. The creek supports brook trout and other native aquatic species and serves as the primary outdoor classroom for approximately 4,500 students and educators each year. The Minnesota DNR also owns a designated public angling easement along this section of the creek, providing community access to fishing.

In June 2024, a severe flood event caused catastrophic damage across the campus. Fast-moving water scoured the streambanks, destabilized riparian soils, and destroyed the 50-foot pedestrian bridge and 266 feet of raised boardwalk that have connected Wolf Ridge's main campus to its core outdoor learning sites, bird-banding stations, and field sites since 1995. Engineering assessments confirmed the structure must be fully reconstructed and that patching or partial repair is not viable.

Without the bridge, the only alternative route is a 1.5-mile walk along a narrow service road shared with delivery trucks, which is unsafe in summer and impassable in winter. More than 120,000 students have crossed this bridge over its lifetime. Its continued loss prevents access to field-based ecology programming, ongoing bird-banding operations, and the public fishing corridor that Wolf Ridge stewards along Sawmill

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 design and construct a climate-resilient pedestrian bridge and boardwalk engineered to withstand the increasing frequency and severity of high-water events in northeastern Minnesota. The new bridge will incorporate helical piles driven up to 20 feet deep, an elevated span profile that clears projected flood levels, and modern flood-adaptive materials and connections.

The project will proceed through three sequential phases beginning July 2027: pre-construction/design, construction, and closeout. The pre-construction/design phase will establish site conditions through geotechnical and hydrological assessment, engage engineering expertise, develop full stamped drawings, and secure all required waterway and construction permits, with a contractor selected through competitive bid by spring 2028. Bridge and boardwalk construction is planned for summer 2028. Closeout, including final inspections, ENRTF signage, and public reopening, will be completed by fall 2028, with final reporting to LCCMR by December 2028.

Restoring safe, reliable access across Sawmill Creek directly enables public angling on both sides of the creek and Wolf Ridge to continue ongoing native conifer establishment and streambank stabilization, bird-banding programs from research stations on the far side of the valley, and daily field-based learning in stream ecology, fisheries, wildlife biology, and forest systems for thousands of students each year.

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?

Reconstructing the Sawmill Creek bridge to climate-resilient standards will protect and enhance the natural resources of this cold-water corridor by reducing risk of future flood-driven streambank disturbance, maintaining public access to a designated angling easement, and enabling ongoing native plantings and streambank stabilization that protect water quality and cold-water habitat for brook trout — a DNR indicator species of concern for our changing climate. The project also sustains Wolf Ridge's bird banding program, contributing to long-term wildlife population monitoring data. Together, these outcomes protect the ecological integrity of the Sawmill Creek valley and its connections to the Lake Superior watershed.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Pre-Construction & Design

Activity Budget: \$49,219

Activity Description:

Objective: Deliver a complete, permitted, and bid-ready design package for the climate-resilient bridge and boardwalk.

Tasks: Wolf Ridge will engage a design/build firm or licensed structural and civil engineer experienced in flood-adaptive infrastructure and Minnesota waterway permitting. The engineer will conduct geotechnical analysis, hydrological analysis to establish flood-level design parameters, and boardwalk alignment evaluation. Engineered drawings will specify helical pile depths, elevated span profile, decking, railings, and an ADA-compliant ramp. Wolf Ridge will coordinate permit applications with the Minnesota DNR, Lake County, and other agencies with jurisdiction. Competitive bidding will be conducted per applicable state contracting requirements.

Outputs: Geotechnical and hydrological site assessment; engineering drawings with ADA ramp design; all required permits secured; contractor selected through competitive bid.

Impact: A thorough pre-construction phase reduces engineering risk, ensures the design is properly sized for projected future flood conditions, and sets up an efficient construction season in summer 2028.

Evaluation: All permits secured and contractor under contract by April 2028.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Design/build firm or engineer engaged; project kickoff complete	August 31, 2027
Geotechnical analysis and hydrological assessment complete	October 31, 2027
Environmental site assessment phase 1 conducted	October 31, 2027
Engineered drawings and specifications complete	January 31, 2028
All waterway and construction permit applications submitted	February 28, 2028
All permits secured; contractor selected; construction contract executed	June 30, 2028

Activity 2: Construction: Climate-Resilient Bridge and Boardwalk

Activity Budget: \$290,391

Activity Description:

Objective: Complete full removal of the damaged bridge structure and construction of the new climate-resilient pedestrian bridge and boardwalk to engineered specifications.

Tasks: The selected contractor will mobilize to the Sawmill Creek site in spring 2028 and complete demolition and removal of the existing damaged structure. Helical piles will be driven to the engineered depth, followed by installation of the elevated bridge span, decking, and railings. The 266-foot raised boardwalk will be constructed along with an ADA-compliant ramp and approach. Wolf Ridge will provide a team for demolition week, and 1 dedicated staff laborer to support the contractor for approximately four weeks during peak construction. The project manager will conduct regular site visits, oversee construction quality and schedule, and manage contractor communications. All work will comply with prevailing wage requirements and applicable state contracting standards.

Outputs: Completed 50-foot climate-resilient bridge; 266-foot raised boardwalk; ADA-compliant ramp; all construction completed to specifications and passing required inspections.

Impact: The completed structure restores safe pedestrian access for 4,500+ students annually, reopens the public angling easement corridor, and provides a flood-hardened crossing engineered to withstand future high-water events.

Evaluation: Construction complete and structure ready for final inspection by September 2028.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Contractor mobilized; existing damaged structure removed	May 31, 2028
Helical pile foundation installation complete	June 30, 2028
Bridge span, decking, and railings construction complete	August 31, 2028
ADA-compliant ramp and boardwalk construction complete	September 30, 2028
All required construction inspections passed	September 30, 2028

Activity 3: Closeout: Commissioning, Public Opening, and Final Reporting

Activity Budget: \$69,390

Activity Description:

Objective: Complete all post-construction requirements, open the bridge and boardwalk to students and the public, and fulfill all LCCMR project reporting and acknowledgment obligations.

Tasks: Wolf Ridge staff will coordinate final inspections with authorities having jurisdiction and obtain all required certificates of occupancy. A durable ENRTF acknowledgment sign will be procured and installed at the bridge entrance per ENRTF Acknowledgment Guidelines. Wolf Ridge will formally reopen the bridge to students, educators, anglers, and the public, and announce the reopening on its website, newsletter, and social media with ENRTF attribution. Staff will compile project documentation, financial records, and outcome data and submit a final report to LCCMR. Engineering specifications and lessons learned will be documented and shared with peer organizations and relevant state agencies.

Outputs: Final inspection approvals and certificates of occupancy; ENRTF acknowledgment sign installed; bridge and boardwalk open to students and public; public angling easement access restored; lessons-learned documentation shared; final project report submitted to LCCMR.

Impact: Formal commissioning ensures the structure is safe, compliant, and publicly accessible. Dissemination positions this project as a replicable model for climate-resilient infrastructure in riparian settings.

Evaluation: All commissioning tasks complete, bridge open, and final report submitted by December 2028.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Final governmental inspections complete; occupancy approvals obtained	October 31, 2028
ENRTF acknowledgment sign procured and installed at bridge site and shared on social media/website	October 31, 2028
Bridge and boardwalk formally opened; public angling easement access restored	October 31, 2028
Lessons learned, documented, and shared with partner agencies	November 30, 2028
Final project report submitted to LCCMR	December 31, 2028
Educational dissemination through curriculum updates and bridge use by classes.	December 31, 2028

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.

Wolf Ridge will document and share the outcomes of the Sawmill Creek Climate-Resilient Bridge and Boardwalk Project through multiple channels, ensuring that the investment of Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund dollars reaches and benefits a broad audience of practitioners, educators, landowners, and the general public.

Project Signage: Upon completion, a durable sign acknowledging ENRTF funding will be installed at the bridge site in compliance with ENRTF Acknowledgment Guidelines. Because the bridge serves as both a functional crossing and a public angling easement corridor, the sign will be visible to students, anglers, and community members who use the site regularly. Wolf Ridge will incorporate the trust fund logo on all project-related print and digital materials.

Practitioner and Agency Sharing: Wolf Ridge will document the specifications, design decisions, and lessons learned from the climate-resilient rebuild to share with the Minnesota DNR, Lake County Soil and Water Conservation District, and peer environmental learning centers facing similar infrastructure challenges on flood-prone waterways. This positions Wolf Ridge's project as a replicable model for other non-profit and public land managers navigating climate-resilient infrastructure in riparian settings.

Educational Integration: The rebuilt bridge and its design rationale will be integrated directly into Wolf Ridge's curriculum. Students visiting the site will learn about flood dynamics, engineering trade-offs, and climate adaptation through the bridge itself, serving as a teaching artifact. Over 4,500 student visitors cross this bridge annually, providing a sustained, in-person dissemination channel that extends well beyond the project period.

Bird Banding Data: Resumption of bird banding operations at stations in the Sawmill Creek valley will allow Wolf Ridge to contribute renewed population monitoring data to regional and national databases, including those managed by the National Bird Banding Laboratory, Institute for Bird Populations, and Minnesota's statewide banding network. This data contributes to long-term wildlife trend analysis and is accessible to researchers and resource managers across the state.

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 climate-resilient bridge is engineered for a multi-decade service life with standard maintenance funded through Wolf Ridge's operating budget. Its flood-adaptive design significantly reduces the risk of future storm damage, protecting the public investment. Access provided by the bridge enables Wolf Ridge to sustain ongoing streambank stabilization and native planting work through annual program budgets and continued philanthropic support, which do not require additional grant funding to maintain once infrastructure access is secured. Bird banding data collected via restored station access will continue to contribute to regional and national wildlife monitoring databases managed by partner organizations.

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 has extensive experience managing large-scale capital construction and complex grant portfolios. Over his tenure at Wolf Ridge, he has overseen capital projects totaling more than \$9 million in scope, including a \$5 million building construction project and infrastructure improvements across Wolf Ridge's 2,000-acre North Shore campus, navigating engineering design, permitting, contractor management, competitive bidding, and state and federal compliance requirements from concept through completion. Pete also has direct experience managing construction at designated trout stream crossings, including projects requiring coordination with the Minnesota DNR.

As Executive Director, Smerud manages Wolf Ridge's \$4.2 million annual operating budget and has successfully administered large public and private grants, including multi-year awards requiring detailed financial tracking, compliance reporting, and deliverable management. He will serve as LCCMR's primary point of contact throughout the project, overseeing engineering, permitting, contractor selection, construction management, and reporting through close-out.

Organization: Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center

Organization Description:

Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center is a private, nonprofit, accredited school located on Minnesota's North Shore. Our mission is to develop a citizenry with the knowledge, skills, motivation, and commitment to work together for a quality environment. Guided by six core values — leadership in our field, learning and innovation, a can-do attitude, collaborative community, environmental stewardship, and a playful and welcoming culture — Wolf Ridge delivers transformative, experiential education rooted in the natural world.

Wolf Ridge hosts K–12 outdoor school groups, graduate-level field educator training programs, summer camps, adult programming, and a teacher training institute. Students and educators typically spend three to five days on our 2,000-acre campus, engaging in hands-on learning across forest, stream, and lake ecosystems. This immersive model connects participants directly to the environment in ways that classroom instruction alone cannot replicate.

For 54 years, Wolf Ridge has been a leader in outdoor environmental education. To date, we have served more than 750,000 students, roughly one in ten Minnesotans. Our programs build lasting environmental literacy and stewardship capacity across generations, making Wolf Ridge one of the most impactful environmental learning organizations in the Upper Midwest.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
Program Director		Dissemination of education-related content related to the completion of the bridge.			18%	0.03		\$4,000
Marketing Director		Dissemination of project information and completion from a marketing standpoint (social media, website, etc.)			18%	0.01		\$1,000
							Sub Total	\$5,000
Contracts and Services								
Construction Company	Service Contract	The selected construction company will carry out the bulk of the work to from predesign, permitting, construction, and closeout to build the bridge and boardwalk over Sawmill Creek.				0		\$404,000
							Sub Total	\$404,000
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	\$409,000

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	Private/Corporate Foundations (Upper Lakes Foods, Patrick & Aimee Butler Foundation, Lloyd K Johnson Foundation, Donald Weesner Charitable Trust, etc.)	These funds will be used to pay for construction costs.	Pending	\$59,905
Cash	Private/Corporate Foundations (Upper Lakes Foods, Patrick & Aimee Butler Foundation, Lloyd K Johnson Foundation, Donald Weesner Charitable Trust, etc.)	Permit paperwork costs	Pending	\$2,500
In-Kind	Wolf Ridge Staff time	Management/Oversight provided by Operations Director, Executive Director, and Maintenance Manager	Secured	\$57,500
In-Kind	Wolf Ridge Staff labor	1 week of prep work with 4 employees, \$40/hour (\$6400 total); 1 person for 20 hours/week, 4 weeks, \$40/hour (\$3,200 total)	Secured	\$9,800
In-Kind	Wolf Ridge Equipment Use	Based on FEMA rates: Skidsteer (\$27/hour x 60 hours), chain saws (\$3/hour x 40 hours), dump trucks (\$55/hour x 16 hours), ATV/UTV (\$20/hour X 25 hours), pickup truck (\$35/hour x 25 hours), Generator 15KW (\$15/hour x 20 hours)	Secured	\$4,295
In-Kind	Pro-bono Engineer	Donated environmental site assessment services	Secured	\$750
			Non State Sub Total	\$134,750
			Funds Total	\$134,750

Total Project Cost: \$543,750

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [856bb50c-95d.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

The attached annotated aerial photo shows the sections of the boardwalk to be rebuilt and the location of the bridge in relation to the Forest Ecology Building on the Wolf Ridge Campus in Finland, MN....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
FY24 Audit	8d41bb9d-399.pdf
990	a4aab4be-713.pdf
Secretary of State Standing	87f71905-58f.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
Board Resolution	34b4da38-a8d.pdf

Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
Capital Construction Project Questionnaire	256dd6bd-d90.pdf
Capital Construction Project Budget Addendum	2a5b501e-1aa.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?

Yes

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:

Peter Smerud - Wolf Ridge ELC, Nathan Engstrom - Wolf Ridge ELC, Misha Evertz - Wolf Ridge ELC

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