



# 4

## THE OUTDOORS

4 steps in 4 years to ensure the future  
of conservation and outdoor recreation  
in Minnesota

**mn** DEPARTMENT OF  
NATURAL RESOURCES





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## Funding what matters to Minnesotans

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In Minnesota, we value the outdoors as a place to relax, be well, adventure, connect, marvel, continue traditions and try something new. Minnesota's identity is entwined with the natural features and wonders that make the state an incredible place to live and visit.

While Minnesotans continually demonstrate their support for the environment and outdoors, Minnesota's current natural resources funding system can't sustainably support the conservation efforts, natural resource management, and outdoor recreation opportunities we value for the future.

Starting in 2021, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources led a transformational effort, in collaboration with a diverse cross-section of people, to identify what Minnesotans value for the future of conservation and outdoor recreation, and what steps we collectively need to take to reach that future. The crux of the work will be to establish a new funding framework for conservation and outdoor recreation in Minnesota. That framework aims to ensure that DNR can serve new, returning, and long-time outdoor enthusiasts, and sustainably manage our natural resources for generations to come. This report lays out the shared vision that was developed through this process, as well as four key areas of action over the next four years.

The foundation of the Minnesota DNR mission is to work with Minnesotans, and this effort will be no exception. Successfully implementing actions that drive sustainable and needed change will require all those who value our natural resources: the Minnesota DNR leadership and staff, partners, business leaders, legislators, nonprofits, environmental organizations, and individual Minnesotans. This framework will guide a fundamental and systemic change to Minnesota's current funding system and will take time, thoughtful approaches, and many strong partnerships to make it a reality.

Minnesota's unique and enviable outdoor spaces and places belong to all Minnesotans. Let's work toward a future that fully values and sustains conservation and outdoor recreation in the state.







Together, we have the opportunity to build the future we want.







## The Challenge Before Us

Minnesota's current funding system doesn't sustainably support conservation and outdoor recreation in ways that are equal to the value Minnesotans place on our natural resources.

For example, the state spending in the environment area is limited. Typically, Minnesota's state budget allocates less than 2.5% total spending to support the work of all the state's environmental and agriculture agencies, including the Minnesota DNR, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture – and related entities. Additionally, user fees for state parks, and fishing and hunting licenses can't reasonably keep pace with cost increases while also ensuring the Minnesota DNR can appropriately steward resources and provide open and affordable access to the outdoors for all people. And, while Minnesotans have showed support for the environment and outdoors through the constitutionally-dedicated Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund and Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, these funds are targeted to specific uses and not available to support some key aspects of natural resource management.

As part of this process, we asked the public and Minnesota DNR staff what concerns they have on the current state of funding for conservation and outdoor recreation.

This is what we heard:





**A lack of investment in conservation and outdoor recreation stresses resources that Minnesotans value.** Additional investment in natural resource management, recreation infrastructure, staff, and technological advancements would benefit Minnesotans.

- *For example:* Minnesota needs more than \$50 million dollars to catch up on infrastructure maintenance for state park facilities and water access locations. Current lack of investment is negatively impacting user experiences at these facilities.



**Funding restrictions and a lack of predictability limit the ability to successfully meet conservation and outdoor recreation goals.** More certainty in funding would allow Minnesota DNR to be nimble, accountable, and plan and manage in line with natural systems and infrastructure lifespans.

- *For example:* Important, public owned, conservation areas need long term management and monitoring to preserve habitat and sensitive species, but funding is too unpredictable from year to year to hire sufficient staff to do the work. Additionally, more extreme weather events mean Minnesota DNR now needs to respond to infrastructure repairs and habitat management that couldn't have been predicted at the time "base" funding levels were established.



There is a **lack of shared stewardship and shared responsibility for conservation actions and recreation resources.** Some communities and interest groups pay for conservation and outdoor recreation access, but all Minnesotans benefit, whether they are direct users or not. The economic benefits to Minnesota, in particular, are not in sync with state funding.

- *For example:* Fishing is a \$2.4 billion dollar industry in Minnesota but fisheries management, which helps ensure there are fish to catch in Minnesota, is almost entirely supported by individual license sales rather than state, community, or private investment.



**There is not a single, "silver bullet" solution that will address the systemic challenges we face.** The funding system is complex and a single, simple solution will not be enough. Minnesota DNR cannot do this work alone and would not be the only beneficiary from an improved funding system.

- *For example:* Past investments in Minnesota's environment and outdoor recreation system, such as the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, were intended to supplement other state investment for conservation and outdoor recreation, but operational funding has eroded due to inflation, funding cuts, and new work left un-funded. One-time investments help, but are not enough. A more comprehensive approach is needed to address gaps.





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## The Vision for a Stronger Outdoor Recreation and Conservation Future

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Through a year-long process of conversations and public engagement, a shared vision for funding the future of outdoor recreation and conservation emerged. This vision included four guideposts:



*Future generations benefit from sustained and improved outdoor recreation experiences and conservation of natural resources.*



*Minnesotans work together to support diverse outdoor recreation opportunities and conservation of our state's natural features.*



*Conservation and outdoor recreation opportunities equitably meet the needs of all Minnesotans.*



*Conservation and outdoor recreation align with and are integrated into Minnesota state priorities.*

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## Expanding on the Vision

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While the vision has four guideposts, each of these markers have additional guidance to bring the vision into greater focus. These details can act as a compass as Minnesotans undertake the path toward this vision.



## What success looks like in Minnesota.



*Future generations benefit from sustained and improved outdoor recreation experiences and conservation of natural resources.*

- Robust, diverse, and high-quality outdoor resources offer all Minnesotans nature-based recreation opportunities
- Ample conservation of high-quality lands and waters provide all Minnesotans the benefits of high-functioning ecosystems
- Conservation and outdoor recreation decisions are based on community values and informed by science and proven best management practices



*Minnesotans work together to support diverse outdoor recreation opportunities and conservation of our state's natural features.*

- The relationship between conservation and recreation uses and spaces is fully understood and accounted for in decision making
- DNR and other Minnesota conservation and outdoor recreation organizations work together effectively, with the complexities of interconnected decision making well understood
- Resources are managed in a manner that fosters innovation and adaptation to changing ecological, social, and technological conditions



*Conservation and outdoor recreation opportunities equitably meet the needs of all Minnesotans.*

- All Minnesotans can access conservation and outdoor recreation services and resources equitably, and management of resources adapts to meet Minnesotans' needs as they change over time
- Support for conservation and outdoor recreation is broad-based with shared stewardship across users and uses
- Minnesotans know how funding for conservation and outdoor recreation is invested and how their communities benefit



*Conservation and outdoor recreation align with and are integrated into Minnesota state priorities.*

- Conservation and outdoor recreation are integrated with, supportive of, and supported by other related state priorities
- Conservation and outdoor recreation are recognized by all as “need to have,” rather than “nice to have,” in funding and policy decision-making
- To help identify alignment with other priorities, solutions for management and funding issues are developed by participants with a variety of experiences and perspectives and with a broad definition of nature and nature experiences





## Taking Collective Action with Minnesotans

To achieve the vision for the future of outdoor recreation and conservation in Minnesota, there are four areas where action is needed. Progress on any one of these actions will help Minnesota advance on the path toward the vision. Progress on all four actions is critical to fully realize what Minnesotans want for the future. These actions require a shared effort on the part of Minnesota DNR, its partners, legislators, nonprofits, and environmental organizations.

We identified potential strategies in connection with these actions, but the list of example strategies is not intended to be exhaustive. As Minnesotans collaborate on this work, we are confident their expertise, passion, and problem-solving know-how will reveal and refine solutions.



**OPTIMIZE THE USE OF  
CURRENT FUNDING**



**EXPLORE USE AND  
APPLICATION OF FEES**



**INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES  
FOR DIRECT SUPPORT**



**SECURE STABLE AND  
PREDICTABLE BASE AND  
OPERATIONAL FUNDING**







## OPTIMIZE THE USE OF CURRENT FUNDING

The Minnesota DNR strives to stretch every dollar and make the most out of what we have available, and we know there is always room for improvement. We will continue to explore options to maximize the funding we have and identify where we could be doing more and doing better.

### Potential strategies

- Maximize existing flexibility within current funding
- Pursue opportunities for efficiency and cost saving
- Prioritize funding for most critical needs and those that will save costs in the future
- Organize co-management practices with other agencies
- Increase accountability and transparency of investments and spending



## EXPLORE USE AND APPLICATION OF FEES

While fees are an area of vulnerability in the current funding system, they will undoubtedly continue to have a role in the funding system for conservation and outdoor recreation in Minnesota. Minnesota DNR wants to make sure impact of uses aligns with cost of those uses and that we do not price the public out of access to public spaces.

### Potential strategies

- Align impact of use to fees
- Implement set and predictable fee adjustments
- Explore recreation pass options
- Establish equity as a leading principle for decisions on fees



## INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIRECT SUPPORT

The Minnesota DNR wants to make it easier for Minnesotans to support the places and activities they love.

### Potential strategies

- Make it easier for people to donate, volunteer, and buy DNR/state park merchandise
- Ease license and recreation pass purchasing, for DNR and possibly with other agencies
- Make it easier for local groups to support local priorities
- Explore options for public/private partnerships



## SECURE STABLE AND PREDICTABLE BASE AND OPERATIONAL FUNDING

The Minnesota DNR will need to work closely with partners and other agencies to explore options to shore up base funding for conservation and outdoor recreation across the state.

### Potential strategies

- Increase and guarantee a percent of the general fund for conservation and outdoor recreation
- Implement an excise tax on outdoor equipment dedicated to the Minnesota DNR and the environment
- Link funding and policy decisions more closely to the economic benefits of conservation and outdoor recreation in Minnesota



## The Journey of Four Steps in Four Years Begins

The Minnesota DNR is grateful to the Minnesotans, partners, staff, and stakeholders who have already embarked on this path with us. We have a well-prepared and vetted map for the way forward, but it will take time, a systematic approach, and each of us working together to arrive at the final vision of the future.

## How you can help



Talk to your friends, family, and DNR and elected officials about what you love in Minnesota's natural places and why stable funding for these resources is important to you.



Sign up for updates – over the next four years we will be engaging in discussions to effectively implement steps forward, and you can be part of that discussion.

### 4 STEPS IN 4 YEARS

**2023**

**2024**

**2025**

**2026**

Focus on “optimize current funding”

Support “optimize current funding” implementation and adaptations

Focus on “fee use and application”

Support “fee use and application” implementation and adaptations

Focus on “opportunities for direct support”

Support “opportunities for direct support” implementation and adaptations

Prep for “stable and predictable base funding”

Focus on “stable and predictable base funding”

Support base funding







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## Connect with us

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For more information on this project and to get involved, please visit: **[mndnr.gov/futurefunding](https://mndnr.gov/futurefunding)**

The Minnesota DNR is committed to working with Minnesotans to ensure we can serve new, returning, and long-time outdoor enthusiasts, and sustainably manage our natural resources for generations to come.

We believe collective support and stewardship of Minnesota's natural resources can lead to solutions to some of our most pressing challenges: public health, community resilience, equity, climate change, and economic and natural resource sustainability.

Minnesotans share in the vision. We invite you to share in realizing that vision for the benefit of current and future Minnesotans.



500 Lafayette Road  
St. Paul, MN 55155-4040  
888-646-6367 or 651-296-6157  
[www.mndnr.gov](https://www.mndnr.gov)

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