



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Dakota County Habitat Protection/Restoration Phase VI

Laws of Minnesota 2018 Final Report

General Information

Date: 09/03/2026

Project Title: Dakota County Habitat Protection/Restoration Phase VI

Funds Recommended: \$2,288,000

Legislative Citation: ML 2018, Ch. 208, Art. 1, Sec. 2, subd 5(f)

Appropriation Language: \$2,288,000 the second year is to the commissioner of natural resources for an agreement with Dakota County to acquire permanent conservation easements and lands in fee and to restore and enhance riparian and other habitats in Dakota County. A list of proposed land acquisitions and restorations and enhancements must be provided as part of the required accomplishment plan.

Manager Information

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Location Information

County Location(s): Dakota.

Eco regions in which work will take place:

Metro / Urban

Southeast Forest

Activity types:

Protect in Easement

Protect in Fee

Restore

Priority resources addressed by activity:

Wetlands

Prairie

Forest

Habitat

Narrative

Summary of Accomplishments

During this grant funding timeline, this project protected a total of 144 acres, 134 in permanent natural area conservation easements, and 10 in fee title with PILT. Ownership of the fee title acquisition was transferred to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) as an addition to Hampton Woods Wildlife Management Area. Additionally, this project was able to restore 700 acres of protected natural areas encompassing prairie, forest, wetland and habitat resource types. The impact of these efforts ensures that high quality green space will persist in Dakota County as urbanization and development continues to impact the greater metro area.

Process & Methods

Through the Dakota County Land Conservation Program, the County has been protecting high-quality natural areas for wildlife habitat and improved water quality, outside its regional park system, since 2003.

During this grant term, Dakota County acquired three permanent natural area conservation easements, and one fee title property, totaling 144 acres. These acquisitions included the following parcels: 1) Wicklund (121.5 acres of wetland, prairie, forest and a segment of Chub Creek); 2) Melbo (4.4 acres of forest and grassland within the Hampton Woods WMA boundary); 3) Loretto (7.9 acres of wetlands, grasslands and forest); and 4) Toohey (10 acres of forest now owned by the DNR within the Hampton Woods WMA). The County also acquired several other permanent natural area easements using County grant-match funding. The voluntary nature of the County's Program comes with a level of uncertainty as it relates to specific parcel outcomes. Applications are accepted year-round for potential conservation easement and fee title projects. Project Prioritization Criteria are used to score and rank project applications. Some projects move through this process to closing, while others stall-out or are withdrawn for various reasons. Modifications made to accommodate evolving acquisition circumstances were critical. The flexibility to add and delete parcels throughout the grant term is key to the success of this type of program.

Regarding restoration efforts, the County successfully restored 700 acres involving 18 unique parcels. Restoration also took place on the three parcels that were protected in easement under this appropriation, which are not formally accounted for in the output tables. The County requires not only Natural Resource Management Plans (NRMPs) for each natural area easement, but also requires that landowners sign a Management Agreement (MA) that outlines restoration and maintenance activities, work responsibilities, and activity funding sources, using cost estimates from accepted contractor proposals. Restoration activities included tasks such as invasive species management and native seeding to re-establish or enhance native species diversity. During the grant term, extreme weather events and seasonal variability contributed to schedule changes and delays in regards to restoration efforts, however County staff and partners maintained flexibility to ensure high quality outcomes given the circumstances. Adherence to prevailing wage requirements led to increased restoration costs, thereby limiting the possible extent of implementing desired restoration workplans.

Significant habitat restoration occurred in Lake Byllesby Regional Park on the southern border of Dakota County, as well as easements along the Cannon River, Vermillion River, Chub Creek, Pine Creek, Chub Lake, Marcott Lake, and Spring Lake, and within the Pine Bend Bluffs SNA. These restoration sites currently support populations of Blanding's turtle, eagle, sandhill crane, deer, eastern cottontail, fisher, fox, coyote, mink, beaver, bats, wild turkey, pheasant, wood duck, other waterfowl, and many species of insects (e.g., butterflies, moths, and bees). Restoration activities anticipate an increase in number and diversity of these and many other species. In addition, Dakota County tags and monitors various wildlife species, including: bats, fishers, Blanding's turtles, snakes, saw-whet owls, bees, and butterflies.

How did the program address habitats of significant value for wildlife species of greatest conservation need, threatened or endangered species, and/or list targeted species?

Dakota County's Land Conservation Program is guided by several comprehensive plans, including the 2017 Natural Resource Management System Plan (NRMSP) and the 2020 Land Conservation Plan, that call for further support of rare and/or listed species. These plans set out specific goals, tactics and geographic areas to support these critical species, all of which is centered around habitat protection and restoration. As noted in these plans, loss of habitat remains as one of the largest contributors to species decline. In Dakota County, habitat loss due to urban/suburban development (encompassing both residential and commercial end uses) and agriculture is common. The Land Conservation Program offers landowners the opportunity to permanently protect pieces of land that may serve as habitat for species of birds, mammals, insects, amphibians and more in perpetuity. Preserving 144 acres through this program and appropriation has ensured that critical species have expanded habitat range here in Dakota County.

In addition to land protection, Dakota County's restoration efforts through this appropriation have also improved the quality of habitat for critical species. The greater metro area is abundant in non-native and/or invasive species that degrade habitat which has rippling effects on wildlife species that depend on these areas. The primary focus on Dakota County's restoration efforts across the identified 700 acres was invasive species management. By utilizing an Integrated Plant Management (IPM) framework, Dakota County successfully reduced pressure from several invasive species, including Common Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), which had previously been outcompeting native plant species that create vital habitat. By removing these pressures from non-native species and promoting native vegetation to return to the landscape instead, the wildlife habitat value has increased dramatically across these acres thereby making them more accessible for critical wildlife species. These restored acres span across different ecotypes that can be observed in Dakota County, including wetlands, prairies and woodlands. Species that depend on these specific habitat types can now find more high quality acres here in Dakota County that they can depend on for future generations.

How did the program use science-based targeting that leveraged or expanded corridors and complexes, reduced fragmentation, or protected areas in the MN County Biological Survey.

The 2020 Land Conservation Plan, which was developed and adopted during this appropriation, builds off of previous local and state agency efforts to identify and prioritize specific tracts of land targeted for future protection and restoration. By combining relevant and available field and GIS data, Dakota County was able to identify a total of 74,863 acres of land that represent some of the highest quality natural resources in the County and include a diverse mix of natural landcover types and agricultural land. They also represent opportunities to restore natural resource integrity and functions and connect high-quality habitat. These areas, which include include a combination of public and private lands, were divided into 24 preliminary Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs). The preliminary CFAs encompass the majority of the sites in the County identified in the MN County Biological Survey as having high or outstanding biodiversity. A broad range of representative native communities

of varying ecological quality exist within the preliminary CFA boundaries. The CFAs also include existing and potential habitat for rare and declining native species, including many with legal protection status.

By establishing these preliminary CFAs, Dakota County has refined its target land acquisition area for the Land Conservation Program. Land situated within a CFA remains eligible for protection and will often score higher for protection to reflect this level of prioritization. The County has focused its outreach efforts to landowners within the defined CFAs, so that connected wildlife habitat corridors can be established over time. Each parcel that was protected under this appropriation, as well as the majority of the acres restored under this appropriation, is situated within a CFA.

Explain Partners, Supporters, & Opposition

Relative to easement acquisitions, the LSOHC and our landowners are the County's partners. The Land Conservation Program (Program) is supported by local governments within Dakota County, in part because the Program results in land remaining in private ownership that still generates tax revenue for local governments. Regarding fee title acquisitions, the County's partners have been the LSOHC, the landowners, the DNR, and Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR). County funding, financial support from FMR, and ownership and long-term management commitments from the DNR helped make the Hampton Woods WMA possible.

Relative to restoration and enhancement, the County has partners that provide resources and opportunities to improve natural habitats throughout the County, including the LSOHC, the DNR, non-profits organizations (e.g., FMR), the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and easement landowners. Opposition is virtually non-existent, with all parties recognizing the benefits of working together to improve natural resources.

Exceptional challenges, expectations, failures, opportunities, or unique aspects of program

Working with a variety of acquisition landowners is challenging. Processes don't always go as planned, timelines can get stalled, side-tracked, altered, and extinguished. For a variety of reasons, only four permanent natural area conservation easement/fee title acquisitions could use partial OHF grant funding during this grant period. This was a disappointing outcome; however, process improvements resulting from staff errors were completed and the County acquisition process improved.

Habitat restoration work can be unpredictable, no matter how well-planned. The weather can disrupt and derail anticipated restoration activities. However, the ability to continue to use grant funds for restoration involving acquisitions from this grant allowed the County to extend its ability to use more grant funds freed-up by ineligible acquisition projects. The fact that Dakota County was unable to use all the allocated grant funds is also a disappointing outcome, but again, process improvements were an added positive result.

What is the plan to sustain and/or maintain this work after the Outdoor Heritage Funds are expended?

Dakota County will continue to invest time and financial resources to maintain the Land Conservation Program and aid in the stewardship of existing easements and the acquisition of future easements. The County will monitor easement sites annually to ensure program compliance as well as to identify any potential natural resource concerns and subsequent management opportunities. For existing easements, stewardship plans and/or natural resource management plans are scheduled to be updated every five years, which is a cycle that is planned to continue with the support of the County's partners. The County will continue to seek out future funding opportunities, especially through LSOHC, to assist with easement acquisition as well as for restoration and enhancement efforts for previously protected lands. It is imperative that opportunities through OHF and similar

programs remain consistent and available so that Dakota County may continue to operate this program at this level for years to come.

Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2026	State grant, County match and landowner contribution	Restore existing and newly protected lands and easements and/or fee title. Create and/or update applicable natural resource management plans.	Monitor easements and restoration projects and use adaptive management for future restoration and enhancement activities.	-
2027	State grant, County match and landowner contribution	Restore existing and newly protected lands and easements and/or fee title. Create and/or update applicable natural resource management plans.	Monitor easements and restoration projects and use adaptive management for future restoration and enhancement activities.	-
2028	State grant, County match and landowner contribution	Restore existing and newly protected lands and easements and/or fee title. Create and/or update applicable natural resource management plans.	Monitor easements and restoration projects and use adaptive management for future restoration and enhancement activities.	-
2029	State grant, County match and landowner contribution	Restore existing and newly protected lands and easements and/or fee title. Create and/or update applicable natural resource management plans.	Monitor easements and restoration projects and use adaptive management for future restoration and enhancement activities.	-

Budget

Totals

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	-	-	-	\$277,500	\$277,500	Dakota County	\$277,500	\$277,500
Contracts	\$677,600	\$1,770,500	\$1,073,400	\$225,800	\$138,000	Dakota County	\$903,400	\$1,211,400
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	\$25,000	\$16,000	-	-	-	-	\$16,000
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	\$1,240,400	-	-	\$413,800	\$1,144,500	Dakota County	\$1,654,200	\$1,144,500
Easement Acquisition	\$370,000	\$461,000	\$301,000	\$123,000	\$243,900	Dakota County	\$493,000	\$544,900
Easement Stewardship	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Travel	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Professional Services	-	\$29,000	\$22,100	-	\$5,800	Dakota County	-	\$27,900
Direct Support Services	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	\$2,500	\$2,500	-	-	-	-	\$2,500
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$2,288,000	\$2,288,000	\$1,415,000	\$1,040,100	\$1,809,700	-	\$3,328,100	\$3,224,700

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Amount Spent	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Multiple positions from multiple County Departments	3.0	3.0	-	\$277,500	Dakota County	\$277,500

Explain any budget challenges or successes:

Ultimately, the unspent funds remaining on this appropriation represent missed opportunities to further land protection and restoration across the County. Dakota County staff had multiple acquisitions denied for reimbursement due to errors in the appraisal process, which is the primary reason for this balance of funds. Dakota County still proceeded with these acquisitions using local funds, which have been accounted for here as match/leverage. Having the ability to restore parcels acquired with this appropriation for additional years beyond the original term expiration date was much appreciated, as it allowed for additional budget to be invested into the land.

Total Revenue: \$0

Revenue Spent: \$0

Revenue Balance: \$0

Of the money disclosed above, what are the appropriate uses of the money:

E. This is not applicable as there was no revenue generated.

What other dedicated funds may collaborate with or contribute to this program?

Parks and Trails Fund

Environment and Natural Resource Trust Fund

How were the funds used to advance the program?

Funds awarded to Dakota County from other state agencies and grant programs have contributed to the advancement of the Land Conservation Program over the years. These programs have allowed for additional acres to be protected, restored and/or enhanced, acting as a complimentary piece to what we have been able to accomplish in partnership with LSOHC. To maintain a conservation program of this scale, Dakota County has sought out multiple funding sources to ensure that we are able to both maintain existing protected land and to acquire new land whenever a willing landowner may inquire.

Output Tables

Acres by Resource Type (Table 1)

Type	Wetland (AP)	Wetland (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	Forest (AP)	Forest (Final)	Habitat (AP)	Habitat (Final)	Total Acres (AP)	Total Acres (Amend)	Total Acres (Final)
Restore	16	62	0	82	40	300	204	256	260	832	700
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	10	10
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	30	0	30	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	10	0	75	0	19	124	30	124	134	134
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	16	72	0	157	40	329	358	286	414	976	844

Total Requested Funding by Resource Type (Table 2)

Type	Wetland (AP)	Wetland (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	Forest (AP)	Forest (Final)	Habitat (AP)	Habitat (Final)	Total Funding (AP)	Total Funding (Final)
Restore	\$56,000	\$92,700	-	\$202,400	\$108,000	\$408,600	\$513,600	\$369,700	\$677,600	\$1,073,400
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	\$18,500	-	-	-	\$18,500
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$1,241,400	-	\$1,241,400	-
Protect in Easement	-	\$24,100	-	\$180,800	-	\$45,800	\$369,000	\$72,400	\$369,000	\$323,100
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	\$56,000	\$116,800	-	\$383,200	\$108,000	\$472,900	\$2,124,000	\$442,100	\$2,288,000	\$1,415,000

Acres within each Ecological Section (Table 3)

Type	Metro / Urban (AP)	Metro / Urban (Final)	Forest / Prairie (AP)	Forest / Prairie (Final)	SE Forest (AP)	SE Forest (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	N. Forest (AP)	N. Forest (Final)	Total (AP)	Total (Amend)	Total (Final)
Restore	165	665	0	0	95	35	0	0	0	0	260	832	700
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	10	10
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	30	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	30	0	0
Protect in Easement	88	130	0	0	36	4	0	0	0	0	124	134	134
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	283	795	0	0	131	49	0	0	0	0	414	976	844

Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section (Table 4)

Type	Metro/ Urban (AP)	Metro/ Urban (Final)	Forest / Prairie (AP)	Forest / Prairie (Final)	SE Forest (AP)	SE Forest (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	N. Forest (AP)	N. Forest (Final)	Total (AP)	Total (Final)
Restore	\$448,800	\$773,100	-	-	\$228,800	\$300,300	-	-	-	-	\$677,600	\$1,073,400
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	\$18,500	-	-	-	-	-	\$18,500
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	\$1,241,400	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$1,241,400	-
Protect in Easement	\$298,000	\$313,400	-	-	\$71,000	\$9,700	-	-	-	-	\$369,000	\$323,100
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	\$1,988,200	\$1,086,500	-	-	\$299,800	\$328,500	-	-	-	-	\$2,288,000	\$1,415,000

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

35,979 Feet

Explain the success/shortage of acre goals

Overall, Dakota County's outcome for land protection and acquisition (encompassing both protect in easement and protect in fee) fell just shy of the original stated goals. This is mainly due to disallowed acquisitions that are not accounted for in these tables as grant money was not used for those particular acquisitions. Dakota County exceeded it's restoration acreage goals significantly, however many of those acres are still in the process of being restored and will be require additional financial support and stewardship in the future.

Outcomes

Programs in metropolitan urbanizing region:

A network of natural land and riparian habitats will connect corridors for wildlife and species in greatest conservation need ~ *Expanding and enhancing networks and corridors of critical habitat is a priority under Dakota County's Land Conservation Program. This outcome may be measured and evaluated quantitatively based on the number of acres protected, restored or enhanced under this appropriation. This can be further examined by determining the number of acres protected, restored or enhanced that fall within Dakota County's preliminary Conservation Focus Areas (CFAs) identified in the 2020 Land Conservation Plan. In addition to this, future vegetative surveys and wildlife monitoring may also aid in the evaluation of program goals, specifically in regards to species in greatest conservation need.*

Programs in southeast forest region:

Healthier populations of endangered, threatened, and special concern species as well as more common species ~ *Routine monitoring of vegetation and wildlife diversity may be used to measure and evaluate this outcome. Baseline ecological assessments are conducted for each parcel that is under consideration for protection. Presence of rare species is noted during this process which, through Dakota County's protection criteria, leads to a higher ranking and higher consideration for protection. Once protected, Dakota County monitors easements for ecological quality and coordinates with landowners and the DNR if further rare species are documented. Only a small portion of the County is included in this region, which limits the extent of opportunities and impact.*

Parcels

Sign-up Criteria?

No

Restore / Enhance Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection	Description
Ag Society	Dakota	11319206	65	\$3,000	Yes	Vermillion River, wetlands, restored prairie
Bakken	Dakota	11219214	44	\$400	Yes	Riparian area along the Cannon River
Betzler	Dakota	11416232	3	\$800	Yes	Forest
Boucher	Dakota	11418215	11	\$1,450	Yes	Riparian area along the Vermillion River
Callister	Dakota	11317231	5	\$28,000	Yes	Pine Creek riparian area
Finden	Dakota	11419230	28	\$73,300	Yes	Vermillion River; riparian area; wetlands
Grannis	Dakota	02722220	80	\$75,000	Yes	Marcott lake and various habitats
Hoffman/McNamara	Dakota	11418212	20	\$43	Yes	Riparian area along the Vermillion River
ISD 200	Dakota	11418215	15	\$160	Yes	Wetlands and ponds
Jennings	Dakota	11320233	40	\$9,600	Yes	Maple basswood remnant forest
Johnson	Dakota	11220210	15	\$520	Yes	Chub Creek riparian area
Lake Byllesby	Dakota	11218211	253	\$228,800	Yes	Shoreline along lake Byllesby and the Cannon River, remnant prairie, wetlands, flood plain forests, cultivated land that would be restored
Loretto	Dakota	11220224	6	\$90,000	Yes	Wetland, restored prairie
MN River Valley Wetland and Floodplain	Dakota	02723218	10	\$17,300	Yes	Wetlands and small streams adjacent to Mississippi River
Melbo	Dakota	11319201	4	\$24,000	Yes	Hampton Woods WMA - forest
Pine Bend Bluffs SNA	Dakota	02722227	17	\$22,400	Yes	Mississippi River bluffs, State SNA
Ruppe	Dakota	11220211	17	\$93,900	Yes	Chub Creek and riparian area
Sipe-Schumacher	Dakota	11318228	32	\$65,000	Yes	Oak woodland, restored prairie
Sunset Sanctuary	Dakota	11319202	40	\$160	Yes	Large open water wetland complex; grasslands and scattered forest
Weiss	Dakota	11517221	5	\$10,300	Yes	Woodland adjacent to Lake Rebecca and the Mississippi River
Wicklund	Dakota	11219218	122	\$223,000	Yes	Chub Creek riparian area, restored prairie, woodlands, wetlands

Fee Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection
Toohey	Dakota	11319201	10	\$25,000	No

Easement Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection
Loretto	Dakota	11220224	8	\$23,200	No
Wicklund	Dakota	11219218	122	\$430,000	No

Easement Parcels with Buildings

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection	Buildings	Value of Buildings
Melbo	Dakota	11319201	4	\$6,000	No	1	\$7,500

Parcel Map

