2024 Strategic Planning Subject Matter Expert Survey

Question: Are there any other thoughts you would like to share regarding the LCCMR funding process?

Contents

SELECTION PROCESS

Responses:

Strengths

- Keep up the great work such as this effort to identify ways to improve Minnesota's natural resources in the most cost-effective and targeted way possible.
- One thing that I have liked over the 25 or so years I have been active in MN resources is how the LCCMR has broadened the type of projects that are funded. At least it seems like more animal/habitat projects are funded now than in the past--I remember when started involvement it seemed that research was something that "the DNR did". Generalizing a bit, perhaps, but that is the contrast I have seen.
- The clarity of the application process is well done. The timing of things is not in the control of the ENRTF, but aligns with the State legislators. LCCMR staff are really wonderful to work with, helpful and patient. The process both for application and post-award is clear and help is always available.
- LCCMR is doing an excellent job of solicitation, evaluation and management of proposals.
- Keep up the great work. Minnesota has the chance to continue to lead on many emerging conservation topics that have international relevance.
- Not really. I did find the online forms fairly intuitive and user-friendly.

Weaknesses:

- The evaluation process strongly favors past grant winners, though both the application and unintentional biases. The application encourages the stretching of the truth with regards to matching funds, even though matching funds are not required.
- The reputation of the LCCMR process has diminished over time, especially with the cohort I am familiar with. Projects do not seem to be funded based on MERIT but rather on politics and special interests. The apparent need for "lobbying" that seems to have developed over the years is appalling. It is also a travesty that State agencies are allowed to compete for LCCMR funds. In some instances, they request and receive tens of millions of dollars. This seems like supplemental funding. These same State agencies already receive massive budgets why do the need to use LCCMR funds?
- It funds the old boys network.
- It is best when politics is removed from the process. It is most frustrating when the bill is held up the legislature as a bargaining chip.
- When the legislature robs the ENRTF to fund pet projects, we lose credibility and transparency.
- The advice of people who have made application to this process is that nothing that might be contrary to entrenched interests will be considered and the process is highly political and not merit-based.
- I submitted more than 10 proposals to LCCMR in the last 12 years. I never got funded, and I lost a lot of precious time and resources. So I stopped writing proposals for you.

- We do not have a favorable view of the LCCMR organization nor support the underhanded nature to which it conducts its operations.

Improvements:

- Overall, the LCCMR funding process is a great resource for Minnesota to foster positive change for Minnesota's Resources. The biggest criticism is that funding rarely gets through the process as recommended or based on merit scores. Too often, highly-rated projects are cut without explanation while other projects that did not go through the process are funded (similarly without explanation), and many projects are asked to reduce their overall budget to allow more projects to be funded. This has created a mentality that project proposers need to 'inflate' their budgets in anticipation of budget cuts. While the goals of the ENRTF and LCCMR are clear and the criteria for how proposals will be ranked and rated are clear, there are many unknowns that occur in the final decision-making for which proposers cannot anticipate, plan for, or overcome with a better proposal.
- A better understanding of how proposal's are being ranked would be great. More transparency in that process.
- Feedback on unfunded applications would be helpful. Either I would know not to spend the time preparing and submitting the type of proposals that I have and why, or I could modify the proposal to improve my chances. Frankly, I think we haven't been funded because we are not the U of MN or other agency that covers the entire state.
- It is not clear what is the expertise of the proposal reviewers.
- My comments here apply to a broader view of the LCCMR process, not just funding. First comment is about reporting. I have been affiliated with several university-led research projects that included "selling points to LCCMR" that noted research findings will be shared with resource managers to help them with their jobs. However, in all instances, I have followed up with managers to see if they received any information (a presentation, direct contact, published paper, final report, etc.) and in all instances they had not. so their is a problem in communication and follow up. Second, in a separate instance, I submitted a proposal for additional funding for a project I spent over a year researching and writing a proposal for. I also collaborated on another proposal for a similar companion study proposed by a state university. Their proposal was very basic and hastily written in an effort to even see if they could get funding to begin it.   The university project was funded whereas my was not. Again, being involved with both studies and knowing the level of effort behind both, I was surprised at the LCCMR funding decision. In another separate instance, I was affiliated with another academia-related proposal. I had severe concerns about the proposal that was submitted. I argued internally in our group that it needed substantially more detail and background research, but the project group decided to submit it anyway and it was again, funded. So in several instances I have been intimately involved in various proposal submitted to LCCMR that I thought were severely lacking in background understanding, proper study design, poor analytical techniques, etc. and in almost all instances they were funded, whereas more robust and detailed proposals were not. This has me questioning who is evaluating the proposals and how are decisions being made. Those items are not clear to me. to be clear, I thought all the projects I was affiliated with were good projects (otherwise I would not be partnered with them), but I thought many

needed a more robust proposal and appeared to me to be simply lazy initial proposals to see if funding could even be acquired. Thank you for the opportunity to relay these experiences.

- A consistent challenge and concern is the "scaling" of projects by the LCCMR committee. Providing closer to full funding will pay for fewer projects, but will also lower the number of times an applicant must apply, in "phases" for the same project. Certainly some applicants "over-ask" in anticipation of a reduction in their request, and this hurts smaller projects that are not as readily scalable.
- Some degree of feedback to proposals that are not funded would be immensely helpful.
- Given the complexity of the topics and the amount of money often required, the proposals should allow more space for the description of ideas, activities and tasks being funded. While I certainly do not advocate free flowing unlimited discussions, it is very difficult to present correctly and truthfully proposals on complex activities like those dealt by LCCMR in the short number of words allowed. The review process would also improve by relaxing current rules.
- It would be nice if capital projects could also be funded.
- In the past it has seemed that some projects get funded because of who they know on the panel and not the merit of the work.
- Simpler than most. The actual decision process is not necessarily transparent (recognized that there are some politics involved) but it works in general.
- Due to Mn variable weather, outdoor recreation systems have a certain lifespan. Many of these outdoor rec systems are reaching the end of their life based on when the LCCMR began and need to be replaced. Please consider funding replacement projects that will maintain the integrity of the system as a whole.
- The annual RFP should align more closely with priorities of the current commission members. If proposals align with priorities, they should be evaluated based on clear criteria. No proposal that makes it to the hearing stage should get a "0" score from any member.
- Make this process less political.
- Applications we have been unsuccessful in getting funded involved the protection of current water resources by improving failing infrastructure. We also have applied for trail construction projects to expand opportunity for citizens to explore our wilderness. It has seemed that the majority of the projects awarded have been more based in University research than projects that promote recreation opportunities or provide physical improvements. Comments we heard when we last applied where for us to apply to the IRRRB instead. At that time it seemed that a couple of members on the LCCMR Board thought that the IRRRB funds everything needed in the Iron Range Communities. This was not true and I would hope projects don't get discounted if they come from our area of the State or involve construction of trails.
- In the past some of our proposals to the LCCMR were declined and we were instructed to apply through MAISRC. I do not think this is a good model because if projects are funded through MAISRC there has to be a U of M researcher on the project. In my opinion this adds to the cost and complexity of the project. All proposals submitted to the LCCMR should have a chance for evaluation and funding through the program.
- Please look at BMPs that will help with water quality and flooding, not the cultural garbage.
- The political nature of LCCMR (based on council member opinion instead of clearly outlined metrics) makes the selection process seem arbitrary at times. The timeline for receiving funds after submitting a proposal is over a year. There's not much that can be done to improve that

when appropriations need to be passed by the legislature, but it is a long delay from project proposal to implementation.

- Include more diversity concerns in providing funds.
- I was led to believe that winning LRRMR funding required lobbying of LCCMR reviewers, which felt very uncomfortable to me. We submitted a grant proposal to introduce a native perennial prairie grass grain product as a regenerative agriculture strategies (for many cobenefits) and never did get feedback or get any sense on how the proposal was reviewed. How it scored? Univ of MN's Forever green program made the submittal and just this week we talked about not receiving feedback to help improve the submittal.
- There is a long lag period between when applications are submitted (March) to when the funding is actually available (the following July, 15 months later). That can be challenging for organizations to wait that long.
- It is really an impressive process.   In my experience, the biggest hinderances are the political nature of the process and the current size of the ENTRF/LCCMR. I suppose the political aspect is unavoidable, but the LCCMR process is often connected to petty political squabbles and other political gamesmanship. The other issue is the size of the ENRTF, which is now so large that hearings are very short because there is only so much time that LCCMR members can devote to the selection process.
- I would like to see how the individual LCCMR committee members vote on individual projects.
- I wonder if the LCCMR has ever requested any sort of 'external audit' to examine bias and influence in the process. While I realize that bias is baked into the process itself, given the political structure of the committee and the selection of citizen members, I think that the LCCMR could take an objective "quality control" look at the decisions that have come from the committee over the years. Are there patterns that are worthy of discussion (e.g. sex differences the ratios of funded versus unfunded researchers?) I do think it's great that everything is made available online to the public. This engenders trust. However, I do not know to what extent lobbyists, political interests and special interests can influence (positively or negatively) the funding of a proposal.
- LCCMR funds mostly 'projects'. One and done. However, for most of our natural resources challenges, it requires an ongoing, multi-year and even decadal, 'program' to solve the problem.

GRANT MANAGEMENT

Responses

Strengths:

- Keep up the excellent work!
- It has been very beneficial to the state.
- I appreciate the communication and support of LCCMR staff as well as the ease of completing materials through the online dashboard.
- This program has allowed a lot of amazing projects to move forward. So glad we have it!
- I don't yet have experience with project selection - hence the "NA", but have managed a project before that was started by someone else. I have really appreciated LCCMR's staff people. They are very helpful , welcome questions, and explain LCCMR processes well.
- Thanks for your good work.
- As a first time applicant, the web based RFP submission system was very user friendly and the support and advice from the staff was timely and informative.
- Thank you for all the good work you do. We are very fortunate in Minnesota to have this system of funding important environmental research and management.
- Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this effort. MN is very fortunate (and forward thinking) to have the ENTRF.
- I just want to say what an incredible gift it is to have this funding program for Minnesota's environment and natural resources. I frequently interact with natural resource professionals from other states and they are always amazed by the financial resources that Minnesota's have provided for work like this.
- The staff are very friendly and answer questions in a timely manner. I like the recorded video with timestamps so I can go back refresh my memory of how to fill out certain forms.
- Thanks for all you do.
- LCCMR is one of the most effective public partnerships to promote sustainable use of natural resources in the US !
- Staff is very helpful.
- Definitely a learning experience to get our proposal in for consideration. but well worth the effort.

Weaknesses:

- Process needs to be less political and more based on scientific merit. Increased proposal length requirements would be helpful.
- The funding process has differed from year to year. The politics & timing of the funding cycle for 2022 was disgraceful. Other years it has been much better.
- I think there should be term limits on representatives and senators that sit on the committee, same as is done for the appointed citizens. Otherwise, this can result in folks turning this into pork barrel projects.

- The politicizing of funding decisions by legislators in both parties is a hinderance to maintaining continuity for the protection of our environment and natural resources. Legislators should be a minority of LCCMR members not a majority since they already have the final say with the appropriations process anyway. We should make it the CCMR not the LCCMR. The ENRTF appropriations bill should be a standalone bill every year and not get incorporated into omnibus environment bills. Also, the application process online is WONDERFUL. It is so easy to save the proposal while still working on it.

Improvements:

- American Indian tribes should have funds set aside for their projects and priorities.
- The new 7/1/25 match and full funding requirements (i.e. full funding legally committed and non-ENRTF match of 25%) noted in LCCMR's 1/17/24 update are going to make smaller NGOs think twice about using this funding source. Larger NGOs will get a most of the money, smaller NGOs will fade away. Fish and wildlife resources are a public trust asset to be managed for all, capability to seek grants should not be limited to the well healed, industrialized NGOs.
- When applying for funding, I would like to see the grant funds match requirement go away. Thank you.
- There should be some consideration towards how AI and technology can be leveraged to reduce expenses, reduce manual data collection, and expedite project delivery.
- There could be improvements in the application process. Meeting with LCCM staff for only 30 minutes is not enough time for reviewing a proposal. It would benefit the applicant to increase meeting time to 45 minutes. There are also several hidden forms and attachments that need to be submitted as requirements. If these forms are required for submission, then why are they hidden? These forms should be more transparent and identified as a tab to be completed as part of the application process. Also, there are some forms that are required as attachments and won't allow you to submit your application until you have provided the attachment. Why not make all the "hidden required forms" (such as capital questionnaire and budget addendum) as required attachments before the applicant is allowed to submit?
- Consider allowing for payment of Billable Rate Costs to Local Governmental Units.
- Allow and support Soil and Water Conservation Districts to apply for LCCMR.
- To be more highly effective, a portion of the grant funding should be provided upfront - it is a real and significant barrier to many nonprofit organizations that cannot afford to bankroll the costs of LCCMR grant projects and wait for reimbursement. The amount of funding that LCCMR distributes to the University of Minnesota is too high and disproportionate to real work happening on the ground to improve habitats, wildlife populations, access to natural spaces - while some research is good and necessary, the U of M is using LCCMR and ENRTF like a cash machine and more resources need to be directed to agencies, communities, and nonprofits that are conducting real, tangible on the ground work to make our environment and natural resources better for people and wildlife.
- The lengthy timelines can be very challenging, particularly for smaller organizations. I worry that potential projects/applicants don't know about LCCMR or don't realize that they could fund good work through LCCMR because the process is lengthy and can be impacted by politics.
- The process that LCCMR oversees is transparent. The actual funding process has become very political, however, which does not seem aligned with the goals of the fund.

- Funding more positions to implement the work needs to be considered. Most folks have an overwhelming number of projects and find it difficult to fund field staff with inflation and staff shortages.
- The reporting process is make-work where you repeat yourself a lot and don't say anything of substance. Less, but high quality reporting would benefit everyone.
- It is a long process - do wonder if it could be tightened to 6 months vs roughly 12 to 18 months.
- My experience with LCCMR staff is nothing but positive. My experience once funded with reimbursement through the DNR has been complicated and unclear. I have seen efforts to address this, but the process is still cumbersome and often unreasonably bureaucratic.
- There are currently three dedicated funds addressing natural resources issues in MN, OHF, CWF and ENRTF. Increasing cooperation between these three funds might improve the effectiveness of management programs.
- Projects that must end June 30th are a disservice to comprehensive field data collection!
- I would like to receive more frequent updates on the funding process. Often, it seems there is not activity, which I know is not the case. Immediately submitting a proposal, make the list available. This year it seems to be non-existent. It provides a secondary peace of mind the grant is submitted. Perhaps allow reimbursements up to two months prior to funding? This could allow for attaining personnel, equipment, training or hours paid for.
- For organizations that have enough staff power or who are familiar with the LCCMR process, it seems the funding process is relatively straight forward. If ENRTF is trying to expand their reach to include applicants from nonprofits or organizations that do not have prior experience with these types of grants, it can be extremely time consuming and the process itself can become a barrier for organizations completing an application or not. While the online portal is nice for submittal, it would be great to have a PDF 'checklist' of all forms, documents, etc. required by applicants sent out at the same time as the RFP so it is very clear what all is required to apply.
- The frequency of funding could be increased via a two year budget cycle.
- Split the call for proposals and funding evaluation into two cycles for each year, thus accelerating the funding processes.
- I appreciate the existence of LCCMR-ENRF plays an important role--as previously noted, I believe there is value in a review of the board structure--strongly consider citizen only vs present composition.
- More flexibility in funding expenditure would be helpful.
- I believe that some portion of these funds should be made available to programs like the MN Dept of Ag Soil Health equipment grant program. We can use these dollars to help equip and educate our ag producers to reduce erosion, sequester carbon in the soil, and reduce or eliminate the movement of nutrients from the land.
- I haven't completed the proposal for a number of years, but I always encourage funders to consider the proposal process, and whether it is accessible to folks who may not have a mainstream organizational support system or may have cultural or social barriers that impact their ability to apply. Eg, could a video or audio application be an option? Does the application have to be completed in English? Thank you for eliciting my ideas! I appreciate the opportunity to be part of the process.

- I love the process, especially relative to research proposals for federal agencies. I do wish it were possible to fund some overhead as there would be more institutional support for LCCMR projects, even if just 5%.
- there are a lot of reporting requirements compared to other grants.
- Allow for a 10% budget shift without having to get an amendment.
- It would be great to unlink politics and funding for districts from the legislators making the decisions - hard for them to be and/or perceived to be unbiased and fair.
- "The length of the funding process runs counter to the statement about Minnesota responding quickly to changing conditions.
- I have found the application process simple and staff very helpful, but the approval process and timeline to be murky at best. "
- Direct and necessary expenses need to be covered.
- I appreciate what LCCMR staff do and help the community to become more knowledgeable and resilient against environmental challenges.
- Funding of research projects is an onerous process that includes many rounds of review, outside expert assessment, and the creation of what almost amounts to a full scientific paper prior to receiving funding. This results in many additional hours of work for the applying entity, which is doubly onerous if the entity is a non-profit or underfunded community partner. For non-profits, this can create cashflow and funding issues that often result in applicants avoiding LCCMR for these types of projects. Could LCCMR build in retroactive, pre-award funding for this category of projects, or for entities like non-profits who don't have municipal or institutional funding like universities and government agencies?
- Having a year and a half between submission and reception of funds is difficult, but it's also understandable based on the legislative calendar. Reports are sometimes difficult to include everything requested by staff within the character limits for each question.
- With research, extended timelines are more often necessary than not. Please, please try to build in some flexibility (I know it's tricky given that it's state funds) that allow no-cost extensions as a default. We will all be able to manage our work better and maximize resource use if we have that flexibility.
- I think the project results need to be more widely shared. the funding portion is very transparent, who applied, what they proposed, and how much they received, but very little on what was accomplished. This could be accomplished in a single section in the final report.
- Is there any way to change when finding is available? It is often a hassle having funding for only half of a year (beginning and sometimes end of funding period). Possibly funding beginning and ending in the winter would be better and not halfway through field season
- Relative short-term research projects frequently encounter personnel changes, minor adjustments in equipment, and supplies, etc. Thus, it is hoped that such minor changes in budget allocation will not necessitate a rebudgeting process, in order to lighten the workload for everyone involved.

COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH

Responses

Improvements:

- Work to raise the ENRTF profile, model, and notoriety nationally.
- As priorities change for the fund, so should the outreach and audience being targeted for promoting the availability of funding.

Responses:

- Focusing on water storage and recharge on agricultural land and providing environmental education opportunities to those citizens not exposed on a regular basis or those unable to access a facility and/or information on environmental concerns will help create a greater, more knowledgeable society.
- Funding should be people-centered. We need to invest resources in building interest in the outdoors through experience. Without interest, the desire to conserve is limited.
- I urge you to consider requiring a study of the environmental impacts of sulfide i.e. Cu Ni mining in other states with similar climactic conditions. Standards for no degradation should be applied and assessed.
- Add accessibility policies, criteria, and protocols to the strategic plan.