Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2025 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2025-298

Proposal Title: Leech Lake Fish Passage Feasibility Study

Project Manager Information

Name: Steven Herrington

Organization: The Nature Conservancy

Office Telephone: (612) 331-0700

Email: sherrington@tnc.org

Project Basic Information

Project Summary: We will complete a feasibility study to restore fish passage at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Leech Lake Dam in Cass County, MN.

ENRTF Funds Requested: $125,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2026

LCCMR Funding Category: Small Projects (H)

Secondary Category: Water Resources (B)

Project Location

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

Region(s): Central

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

Region(s): Central, NW, NE,

When will the work impact occur?

In the Future

Narrative

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

Fragmentation of rivers and streams due to dams, culverts, and other barriers is amongst the most important factors degrading the survival of fishes and other aquatic organisms worldwide. These barriers prevent access to up- and downstream habitats needed for reproduction, feeding, refuge and other life cycle needs, commonly resulting in population declines, extirpation, and even extinction. Many affected species are also important to communities economically and culturally, with their diminution from these barriers having widespread societal impacts. As such, there have been increasing efforts nationwide to restore in-stream connectivity for aquatic organisms to ensure their long-term population viability in a changing climate. Designing and implementing fish passage systems around difficult to remove barriers such as large dams can benefit numerous species and provide far-ranging ecosystem-level benefits. Located on Leech Lake in Cass Co., MN, the Leech Lake Dam has entirely blocked fish passage in Leech Lake River for over 140 years. This project will provide the draft engineering approach needed to implement future fish passage at the dam, a necessary step for restoring connectivity and ensuring the long-term health of the river system for dozens of fish species and the communities that depend on them.

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 Conservancy is partnering with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to develop a feasibility study for constructing a future fish passage solution at the USACE dam impounding Leech Lake in Cass County, Minnesota. The Leech Lake Dam is located at the outlet of the reservoir on the Leech Lake River and is located within the boundaries of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Reservation, though the dam itself is on USACE fee-owned land. The USACE dam at Leech Lake offers no connectivity for aquatic organisms to pass from the Leech Lake River upstream to Leech Lake, and vice versa. This has halted the natural migratory routes for aquatic organisms such as river suckers, Walleye, and Northern Pike and has negatively impacted the biodiversity in the Leech Lake River system. This project will result in a draft engineering design for constructing an aquatic organism connectivity solution to improve the long-term ecological resiliency for an estimated 610 miles the Leech Lake and Leech Lake River systems. LCCMR funds will be leveraged against $325,000 of USACE federal funding allocated for the study, expanding the reach and impact of this state program for conserving Minnesota's natural resources.

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?

The feasibility study will result in a project management plan that will include (1) a draft engineering plan for providing future fish passage, (2) environmental modeling, monitoring, and adaptive management; (3) ensuring compliance with environmental laws; (4) draft cost estimation; (5) a real estate plan; (6) a socioeconomic assessment and plan; and (7) related outcomes typical to a USACE feasibility study and integrated environmental assessment study report.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Feasibility Study Development

Activity Budget: $125,000

Activity Description:
Includes all activities as a non-government cost-share partner under the USACE-TNC federal cost-share agreement for developing the project management plans described above, including meetings, research, data collection, and related planning activities.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Feasibility study completion	June 30, 2026

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Kevin Bigalke	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Paul District	Federal project sponsor and project partner. USACE is the owner of Leech Lake Dam (project location) and will be responsible for implementing designs and recommendation developed under this feasibility study.	Yes
Steve Mortensen	Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	Project collaborator. The LLBO will work closely with USACE and TNC on all aspects of the feasibility study, especially how the study affects and benefits its reservation, resources, and interests.	No
TBD	Minnesota DNR	Project collaborator. The DNR will advise on fish passage design under the feasibility study.	No

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?

Results from this feasibility study would be used to inform the full design, implementation, and long-term operation, maintenance, and monitoring of a fish passage system at Leech Lake Dam. Funding for implementation would be pursued via USACE's Continuing Authorities Program, which allows for funding capital improvements at federally owned and operated facilities. Initial USACE cost estimates for constructing a fish passage solution are approximately $2.5 million, of which The Nature Conservancy hopes to act as a future federal cost share partners to provide 1:1 funding match for future implementation of the feasibility study, if funding and agreements allow.

Other ENRTF Appropriations Awarded in the Last Six Years

Name	Appropriation	Amount Awarded
Community Response Monitoring for Adaptive Management	M.L. 2023, , Chp. 60, Art. 2, Sec. 2, Subd. 03r	$483,000

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Steven Herrington

Job Title: Associate Director of Water

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

Steve Herrington is the Associate Director of Water for the Minnesota-North Dakota-South Dakota Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. An aquatic ecologist with over 25 years' experience in fish and stream ecology, Steve has worked with The Nature Conservancy since 2004. Steve has led and collaborated on a variety of freshwater initiatives across the U.S., including conservation planning, river restoration, dam removal and fish passage, environmental flow development, outreach and education, and implementing nature-based solutions with measurable benefits and climate change resiliency. Notably, Steve has managed three large-river fish passage projects with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and multiple conservation partners in Alabama and Florida, including concept development, funding, partnership management, implementation, and long-term measuring of success.

Organization: The Nature Conservancy

Organization Description:

Founded in 1951, the Nature Conservancy is a global conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and

waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We are tackling climate change, conserving lands, waters, and oceans at unprecedented scale, providing food and water sustainably and helping make cities more sustainable. Working in 72 countries and in all 50 United States, we use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	$ Amount
Personnel								
							Sub Total	**-**
Contracts and Services								
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	Sub award	The USACE is leading feasibility study completion and is responsible for all elements as described herein. TNC is the non-federal cost-share partner under the USACE's CAP 1135 program for the project and provides 1:1 payments to the USACE to support their staff and program for study completion.				-		$125,000
							Sub Total	**$125,000**
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
							Sub Total	**-**
Capital Expenditures								
							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	**$125,000**

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				
			Non State Sub Total	**-**
			Funds Total	**-**

Total Project Cost: $125,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: 9fc19c42-526.pdf

Alternate Text for Visual Component

The visual is comprised of two photos: one showing a site-level photo of Leech Lake Dam, the other showing a conceptual fish passage design for a fish bypass channel around an existing dam, similar to what is being considered under this study....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
TNC 2023 audit	00b63391-b11.pdf
Certificate of Good Standing_nonprofit	283ee1c2-8fa.pdf
IRS tax exemption_Form990	ec6f0104-0bc.pdf
MN business_TNC	103ea251-4c3.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
Assistant Secretary Certificate	ca4ae690-b93.pdf
TNC Director letter	33163279-562.pdf

Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
USACE-TNC Leech Lake federal cost share agreement_Sep2023	1d5fe079-1ba.pdf
MHB Leech Lake feasibility study support letter	ee229f6f-6f6.pdf

Administrative Use

Does your project include restoration or acquisition of land rights?

No

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")?

No

Provide the name(s) and organization(s) of additional individuals assisting in the completion of this proposal:

Marya McIntosh, Jeff Streier, Sydnie Pettaway, Rachel Hampton (all with The Nature Conservancy); Kevin Bigalke (USACE-St. Paul District)