

April 19, 2022

Senator Torrey Westrom
Senate Conference Committee Chair, Drought Recovery and Assistance Bill
95 University Ave W
Minnesota Senate Building, Room 3201
St. Paul, MN 55155

Representative Mike Sundin
House Conference Committee Chair, Drought Recovery and Assistance Bill
417 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Westrom and Chair Sundin:

I am writing on behalf of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) regarding the Drought Recovery and Assistance Bill, House File 3420 (2nd Engrossment) and SF3779 (2nd Unofficial Engrossment). The DNR appreciates work that the House and Senate have done to assemble these bills. The House bill includes the entirety of the Governor's drought relief proposal, while the Senate bill includes only the agriculture-related items and none of the natural resource items. The administration continues to support comprehensive drought relief measures, and we urge the Senate to support the proposal as well.

Last fall, shortly after the Governor and Department of Agriculture released a proposal for drought relief for farmers, the Governor and DNR announced a \$13.35 million proposal in response to the significant adverse effects of the 2021 drought on two of the state's critical natural resources: water and trees. The elements of this proposal are described below.

Drought-Induced Seedling Mortality

The 2021 drought severely impacted recent reforestation efforts on state, tribal, county and private forest lands. The DNR estimates mortality of 72 percent for conifer plantings less than four years old. Field monitoring conducted this summer revealed seedling mortality of 100 percent on some DNR sites.

Half of the proposed \$5.55 million investment would replace seedlings that didn't survive the drought on DNR-managed lands and the other half would go to a pass-through grant program to provide relief to tribal, county, and private forest owners who are also faced with drought-related reforestation needs. This investment provides necessary funding to ensure Minnesota's young forests continue to grow by replanting 6.8 million drought-damaged seedlings.

Community Drought ReLeaf Grants

Trees become stressed during times of drought, leaving them more susceptible to damage from pests and disease. This, on top of the ongoing challenge of emerald ash borer, makes it essential that local and tribal governments have access to technical and financial support to replace shade trees and maintain vital tree cover. In recent years,

the DNR has seen great demand for shade tree grants to communities, with requests far outpacing available funding. The 2021 drought significantly added to that need. This proposal includes \$4.5 million for shade tree grants to communities to replace drought-stressed trees and acquire tree watering bags and equipment to support tree survival in the future.

Water Conservation Grants

Times of drought remind us all of the importance of water. To prepare for the next drought, communities can take high-impact measures now to conserve significant amounts of water, sometimes in the range of millions of gallons a year. This proposal includes \$3 million in funding for municipal, tribal, and other community water suppliers to implement proactive water conservation measures in their own infrastructure, and to incentivize their residential and business customers to install water-efficient equipment. Eligible water conservation projects could include:

- Finding and repairing leaks
- Incentivizing residential and business customers to install water-saving devices
- Increasing irrigation efficiency for both municipal and residential systems
- Education campaigns geared toward residents to promote conservation actions.

Individual/Small Community Well Interference

Drought conditions often increase the incidence of “well interference”, a situation in which a domestic or municipal well runs out of water due to nearby high-capacity groundwater users. In 2021, 24 domestic well interferences were officially reported to the DNR and an additional 34 “out of water” calls were received without a formal complaint filed. It takes time for the DNR to investigate and confirm the cause of a well interference, which can create delays in resolving the situation. Meanwhile, owners and municipalities incur costs to repair wells, lower pumps, or drill new wells, costs which can range from \$2,000 to more than \$10,000. This proposal provides \$300,000 in funding to reimburse or directly pay corrective action costs incurred by domestic well owners and municipalities to resolve DNR-confirmed well interference problems in a rapid, efficient, and equitable manner.

We look forward to working with the Conference Committee on drought relief in both agricultural and natural resource sectors.

Sincerely,



Sarah Strommen
Commissioner

CC:

Speaker of the House Melissa Hortman
House Minority Leader Kurt Daudt
Senate Majority Leader Jeremy Miller
Senate Minority Leader Melisa Lopez Franzen
Rachel Ganani, Policy Advisor, Office of Governor Tim Walz and Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan
Drought Recovery and Assistance Bill Conferees
Rep. Samantha Vang
Rep. Rick Hansen
Rep. Rob Ecklund
Sen. Bill Weber

Sen. Andrew Lang
Sen. Gary Dahms
Sen. Kent Eken