



Friends of Minnesota Scientific & Natural Areas

January, 2023

Issue: Lack of Maintenance Funding Threatens Scientific and Natural Areas (SNA) Assets

Background:

Minnesota's 168 Scientific and Natural Areas (SNAs) encompass 192,000 acres, of which 146,000 acres are Peatland SNAs. In addition, there are about 14,000 acres in State Native Prairie Bank (NPB) at 157 sites statewide, administered by the SNA Program.

Over 25% of Minnesota's rare plant and animal species and native plant communities are found on these 168 sites. These sites range from 6 acres to several thousand acres in size (excluding the SNA peatlands).

Most of these sites were acquired with state funds, and others by private donation or on an existing public land base, all for the purpose of protecting and perpetuating these rare plant and animal species, plant communities and geological features of *statewide significance*.

Issue:

Unfortunately, state general funds which are needed to ensure these features of statewide significance continue to exist and be managed in a manner to perpetuate their existence, have declined since the early 2000s - to the point that these attributes are being lost. Less general funds results in a dramatic reduction in the number of permanent staff, available and necessary to carry out and direct maintenance on these sites. Less permanent SNA staff, to direct and monitor essential maintenance activities in the SNA program, results in an inability to fully

utilize special and temporary funding sources, such as the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund and the Outdoor Heritage Fund.

Essential maintenance activities include prescribed burning of native prairie and selected forest communities to limit encroachment of brush and trees in order to maintain grassland habitat for not only rare species but the plant community itself. Exotic invasive species management, maintaining property through fencing and posting to prevent or limit encroachment, regular contacts with adjacent neighbors, directing contractors hired to do maintenance, and monitoring results of maintenance activities are essential to ensuring the health and vitality of the individual sites.

One example serves to illustrate the issue: Region 4 with headquarters in New Ulm. This DNR Region covers 32 counties and includes 37 SNAs with 4,489 acres and another 110 NPB conservation easements with 7,398 acres. Yet there are only 4 SNA personnel (2 Natural Resource Specialist, a technician and 1 laborer). This low staffing level makes it impossible to carry out and monitor all of the maintenance activities necessary. As a result, some sites may not have any maintenance for years.

Solution:

Statewide, an **additional \$6 million biennially– is needed to provide the essential maintenance required.** These funds would provide up to 33 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) positions comprised of Natural Resource professionals, technicians, and labor crews as well as equipment and supplies to each of DNR Regions 1, 3, and 4 – due to their workloads. Region 2 needs an additional 2 FTEs and equipment and supplies. There is a need for a Rangeland Coordinator, to work on Prairie Bank Easements where grazing rights are being retained by the landowner. This position would be stationed outstate. The central office requires funding for the Outreach Coordinator and administrative support (clerical).

In summary, **\$6 million, of state general funds each biennium,** would provide the necessary staffing and equipment and management supplies to adequately protect and manage Minnesota’s most important and sensitive natural resources for present and future generations.

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Friends of Minnesota Scientific & Natural Areas

Friends of Minnesota Scientific and Natural Areas Recommends an additional \$6 Million, Per Biennium, for the DNR Scientific and Natural Area (SNA) Program

The following summary of needs is based on our knowledge of the SNA Program.

DNR Regions 1 (Northwest MN), 3 (Central & Southeast MN) and 4 (Southwest MN): example;

These three regions need a total of **up to 11 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) positions in each DNR Region**. These FTEs would be composed of professional resource personnel, technicians, and management crews needed to plan, oversee, and carry out management activities on SNA and Native Prairie Bank sites, coordinate with Prairie Bank owners relative to retained property rights, coordinate with adjacent landowners and local units of government.

Up to 33 FTEs for staffing these 3 regions: \$3.6 million

Equipment and management supplies (trucks, ATVs, lodging, travel expenses, chain saws, office space etc.): \$1.5 million

DNR Region 2 (Northeast MN): example:

Up to 2 FTEs for staffing this region: \$225,000

Equipment and management supplies (ATVs, lodging, travel etc.): \$275,000

Central Office:

1 FTE is needed for statewide outreach from the Central St. Paul Office. This effort also requires outreach materials and clerical and administrative support.

Cost for Central Office: \$400,000

One example serves to illustrate the issue: Region 4 with headquarters in New Ulm. This DNR Region covers 32 counties and includes 37 SNAs with 4,489 acres and another 110 NPB conservation easements with 7,398 acres. Yet, there are only 4 SNA personnel (2 Natural Resource Specialists, a technician and 1 laborer). This low staffing level makes it

impossible to carry out and monitor all of the maintenance activities necessary. As a result, some sites may not have any maintenance for years.

In total, the SNA Program needs an additional \$6 million in general funds, for each biennium, to cover essential management, outreach, equipment, and administration costs. .

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Representative Rick Hansen
Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Committee
407 State Office Building
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155

March 1, 2023

Dear Chair Hansen and Members of the Environment & Natural Resources Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share The Nature Conservancy's support for HF1834 authored by Representative Samantha Vang, which would provide funding for the maintenance of Scientific and Natural Areas (SNAs).

Scientific and Natural Areas protect sensitive habitats that are often home to rare species of plants, wildlife, and other geologic features. Moreover, SNAs provide critical benefits to wildlife, water quality, and climate while remaining accessible to the public for outdoor recreation.

Inconsistent investments in maintenance of these unique areas leads to a decline in ecological health and overall quality of the habitats. In the face of a worsening biodiversity crisis, the investment proposed in this bill would provide the necessary resources to properly manage and maintain these areas, which will further support biodiversity under stress. This will also ensure that SNAs continue to provide important ecological and recreational benefits for future generations.

In addition to these needed investments to maintain SNAs, we also support the expansion of the program to continue to protect naturally significant lands. As this committee considers investments that can address climate change and make Minnesota more resilient, we encourage you to include this program alongside investments in other natural climate solutions.

Thank you for considering HF1834 and your work on behalf of Minnesotans.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Pinkalla
Government Relations Director
The Nature Conservancy in Minnesota

Molly Jansen
Government Relations Specialist
The Nature Conservancy in Minnesota



Rep. Rick Hansen
Chair, Env. and Natural Resources Finance and Policy
407 State Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Hansen,

Breckenridge Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America, IWLA, is writing in support of a bill before the committee, Rep. Vang's HF 1834, *Scientific and Natural Area Maintenance; Appropriation*. This is a bill that would allow the DNR to maintain our SNA's to the degree needed to ensure they continue to exist in an undisturbed natural state.

Over 25% of Minnesota's rare plant and animal species and native plant communities are found on these SNAs. Unfortunately, **state general funds have declined** since the early 2000s - to the point that some of their key attributes are being lost.

An SNA in the Twin Cities north-metro area, Blaine Preserve, has the best remaining example of wet prairies and rich fens in the Anoka Sand Plain. It has not seen a controlled burn in many years. The rare and threatened species there are being overwhelmed by buckthorn and aspen.

IWLA member and University of Minnesota Prof. Peter Sorenson is extremely concerned about protecting SNAs, which he considers to be "great treasures and invaluable reservoirs of genetic material in a future world threatened by climate change". He states that the threat of invasives is especially ominous.

Our recent MN IWLA President, Ted Suss writes "When I lived in Redwood County, I was quite close to four very unique SNAs (Gneiss Outcrops, Swedes Forrest, Cedar Rock SNA, and the Morton Outcrops SNA in the city of Morton). These SNAs appear to be virtually ignored from a maintenance perspective, especially invasive species control, unless local people bring pressure to bear. Morton Gneiss was totally overgrown with invasive Cedar until a group of us demanded it be cut. Cedar Mountain is quickly becoming a buckthorn heaven. My guess is lack of maintenance is common across virtually all SNAs."

Less general funds results in a dramatic reduction in the number of permanent staff available and necessary to carry out and direct maintenance on these sites. Less permanent experienced SNA staff, to direct and monitor essential maintenance activities in the SNA program, **results in an inability to fully utilize special and temporary funding sources** such as the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund and the Outdoor Heritage Fund. While **LCCMR and OHC funds are important**, there is **no assurance they will be directed to the SNA Program every biennium**.

In order to have EXPERIENCED staff, it is necessary to **assure an employee that their position will continue beyond a 2-year funding cycle**. Only General funds can be depended upon to provide continuity from year to year by **allowing the retention of knowledgeable, trained and experienced staff**.

In summary, **an ongoing \$6 million of state general funds each biennium**, would provide the necessary staffing, equipment and management supplies to adequately protect and manage Minnesota's most important and sensitive natural resources for present and future generations.

If there is anything we can do as an organization in support of these bills, please do not hesitate to ask. Thank you for your efforts to promote conservation of Minnesota's natural resources. We strongly encourage the committee to approve this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Johnson', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Tim Johnson
Conservation Issues Chair
Breckenridge Chapter of the IWLA
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Dear Mr. Strohmeier,

Please add the following to Testimony regarding HF1834 (Vang)

Testimony of Dell Eriksson,
Brooklyn Center, MN

Before the
Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy
Meeting, March 1, 2023
Regarding HF1834 (Vang)

I encourage the Committee not to support HF1834.

SNA's are the best natural areas in Minnesota and we need many more of them.

However, HF1834 (Vang) fails to mention how that large amount of money will be spent on an SNA.

It is difficult to imagine how that much money can be used in a natural area. It's not something that needs any structures or roads or paved trails or parking lots.

On the other hand, the \$6,000,000 should be used to acquire additional SNA lands in another area.

I encourage the Committee not to support HF1834.

In an email to Rep. Vang, my State Representative, I asked her what will the money be used for.

As is always the case, she did not reply, nor does HF1834 explain.

However, we now see an amendment being added, 1834A3 that partially explains the use of this vast sum.

(b) \$6,000,000 in fiscal year 2024 is appropriated from the general fund to the
1.6 commissioner of natural resources for acquisition and improved maintenance and restoration
1.7 at Grey Cloud Dunes Scientific and Natural Area. This is a onetime appropriation and is
1.8 available until June 30, 2025."

Maintenance and restoration? \$6,000,000!!!

Grey Cloud is a wonderful SNA, my wife and I have visited it and taken many photographs while experiencing the wonderful species evident there.

Although it is an important natural area; many questions require answers.

Spending more than \$25,000 per acre on an SNA should raise yellow flags of caution.

Please do not support this Bill; use the money for other SNA acquisitions.