

February 7, 2022

Issue: Lack of Maintenance 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 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**, 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 \$3.3 million – of state general funds – is needed to provide the essential maintenance required.** These funds would provide 1 additional Natural Resource Specialist position, 2 Natural Resource technicians, 2 seasonal crews, equipment and supplies to each of DNR Regions 1, 3, and 4 – due to their workloads. Region 2 needs an additional Natural Resource Specialist, seasonal crew, 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, **\$3.3 million, of state general funds,** would cover 4 Natural Resource Specialists, 6 Natural Resource Technicians, 7 seasonal crews, a Rangeland Coordinator, an Outreach Coordinator, equipment, and administration. (Specifics are available in separate document.)

Scientific and Natural Area (SNA) Program Funding Needs – FY 2022

The following summary of needs is based on our knowledge of the Scientific and Natural Areas Program. (**Values in thousands**, based on FY 2021 Minnesota salary schedules and equipment costs.)

DNR Regions 1, 3 and 4 (each):

1 Natural Resource Specialist (Intermediate) w/dependent insurance coverage: \$84

2 Natural Resource Technician full time w/insurance: \$138

2 roving crews (4 persons each): \$344

Truck, ATV, trailer 2 each: \$134

Management supplies (lodging, travel expenses, chain saws, office space etc.): \$200

DNR Regions 1, 3, and 4 each need \$900,000 = \$2.7 million (total)

DNR Region 2:

1 Natural Resource Specialist: \$69

1 seasonal crew (2 person): \$43

1 truck, ATV, trailer: \$67

Management supplies: \$126

Region 2 needs \$305,000 (total)

Subtotal: SNA program outstate needs (Regions 1-4) are approximately \$3 million.

The above subtotal is the needed increase for management alone. This amount does not cover the Outreach Coordinator in the central office, which is critical to increase appropriate public use. For that position (\$100) and tech support/outreach materials (\$50). There is also a need for a Rangeland Coordinator to work on Prairie Bank Easements, where a landowner desires to retain grazing rights (\$100). In addition, the central office could use an additional \$50 for clerical and administrative support. **This subtotal = \$300.**

In total, the SNA Program needs an additional \$3.3 million in general funds, annually, for management, outreach, and administration.