

Oak Savanna Program seeks to restore one of Minnesota's rarest ecosystems



YOUR Clean Water
Fund AT WORK

Funding is provided via the Outdoor Heritage Fund and the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. Both funds draw from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) is preparing to launch a new initiative designed to restore and enhance one of Minnesota's most threatened native ecosystems while providing critical habitat for pollinators, birds and other wildlife.

The Oak Savanna Restoration for Living Landscapes program aims to reconnect existing oak savanna habitats through locally led conservation projects in Minnesota's [Eastern Broadleaf Forest Province](#), which includes nearly 12 million acres in the central and southeastern parts of the state and serves as a transition zone between prairies and forests.

[Oak savannas](#) are transitional ecosystems found between tallgrass prairie and woodland environments. They offer valuable habitat to bird species that depend on open

woodlands for feeding and nesting, such as red-headed woodpeckers, Eastern bluebirds, loggerhead shrikes and Eastern whip-poor-wills.



Oak savannas once covered nearly 10% of Minnesota, but today they are among the state's rarest and most threatened ecosystems. Fire suppression, agriculture and urban development have reduced oak savanna coverage to less than one-tenth of 1 percent of their original acreage. Despite their scarcity, these landscapes support high wildlife diversity, including more than 90 [Species of Greatest Conservation Need](#), including the federally endangered rusty patched bumblebee (Minnesota's

An oak savanna, such as this one located within Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge in Zimmerman, provides transitional habitat between prairies and forests. Photo Courtesy of Ann Wessel

state bee), the regal fritillary, monarch butterfly and red-headed woodpecker.

“Healthy oak savannas store carbon, improve soil health and water quality, increase climate resilience, and provide outstanding public recreation and educational opportunities,” said BWSR Ecological Science Conservationist Jason Beckler, who is developing the program. “This program creates an opportunity for us to take a targeted approach when restoring these rare and valuable habitats.”

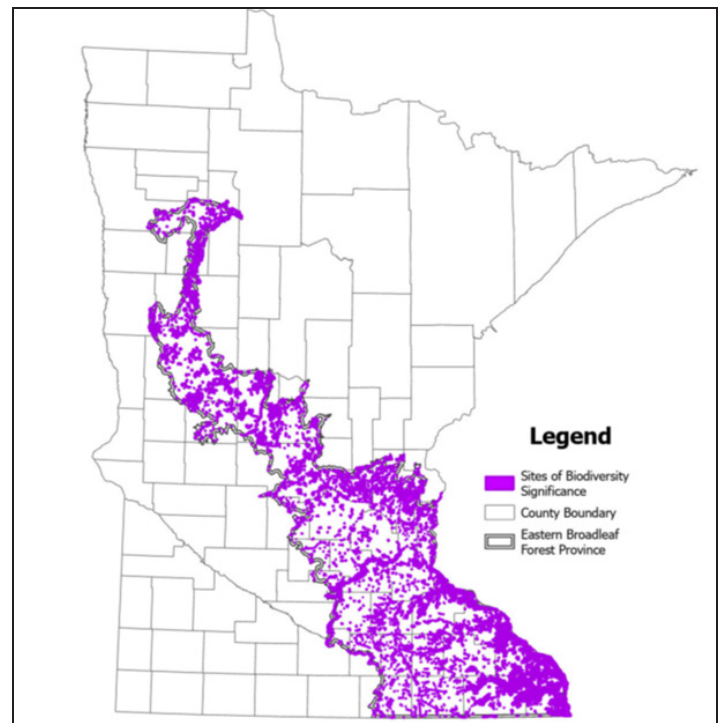
BWSR will partner with the [Xerces Society](#), a science-based nonprofit that protects wildlife through the conservation of invertebrates and their habitats, to administer the program. The Xerces Society will serve as the program’s science and technical lead, working to ensure that restoration decisions related to site planning, seed mix design, and vegetation establishment and management will maximize benefits for pollinators, invertebrates and overall biodiversity. Xerces Society staff will produce specialized restoration guidance tailored to oak savannas, customize ecoregional seed mixes, and deliver training and workshops on topics such as climate-resilient plant selection, pesticide risk reduction, and long-term

monitoring.

“We hope this program will catalyze a network of resilient, biodiverse oak savanna-prairie-woodland mosaics across the Eastern Broadleaf Forest Province — landscapes capable of supporting Minnesota’s Species of Greatest Conservation Need, bolstering populations of pollinators, and withstanding climate extremes,” said Karin Jokela, Xerces Society pollinator conservation specialist. “Ultimately, the initiative aims to create replicability with monitoring templates, seed mix guidance, and case studies that help scale oak savanna restoration across the state.”

The program is supported by two appropriations passed during the 2026 legislative session: \$1.7 million from the Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) and \$1.94 million from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF). The work is part of BWSR’s [Living Landscapes Initiative](#), which promotes programs that support at-risk wildlife species, establish habitat corridors and build landscape resiliency through collaboration with conservation partners and Minnesota residents.

BWSR plans to open the first competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) for the program later this



Projects funded via BWSR’s Oak Savanna Restoration for Living Landscapes program must be located within Minnesota’s Eastern Broadleaf Forest Province.

Map Credit: BWSR

fall. Applications will be evaluated through a scoring and ranking process designed to identify projects that provide the greatest conservation value, strengthen habitat connectivity and deliver long-term benefits for wildlife and pollinators. Eligible applicants will include soil and water conservation districts, counties, cities and Tribal Governments with proposed projects located within Minnesota’s Eastern Broadleaf Forest Province.

“Since this is a new program, we really encourage

those eligible applicants to reach out to us at any time with questions, even well before we open the formal RFP,” Beckler said. “Early coordination can help identify project opportunities, determine eligibility and strengthen future applications before the competitive RFP is released.”

Contact Jason Beckler at jason.beckler@state.mn.us with questions.

BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.