

Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Grant Program



Photo Credit: Dan Kirk

2021 Notice of Funding Opportunity

Applications are now being accepted for Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Grant Program from April 1 thru May 28, 2021.

Overview

The Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Grant Program purpose of the grant program is to: 1) Increase stewardship on dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves and registered Land and Water Reserves through grants to Conservation Land Trusts, and 2) Increase stewardship capacity within Conservation Land Trusts.

Funding for this grant program is derived from the Illinois Natural Areas Acquisition Fund (NAAF) and must be used by the Department of Natural Resources for the acquisition, protection, and stewardship of natural areas, including habitats for endangered and threatened species (Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development Act, 525 ILCS 35/14). Stewardship actions funded by this grant program must be included in the management schedules approved by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. Eligible costs may include staff time related to the project, equipment and materials necessary to complete stewardship projects such as tools, safety items, herbicide, construction materials, and indirect costs. Benefit costs are not eligible.

Eligible applicants must be Conservation Land Trusts exempt from taxation under Section 501 (c) (3) of the federal Internal Revenue Code and include in its purposes the restoration and stewardship of land for conservation purposes.

By Administrative Rule, maximum funding to one project is \$100,000. There is a 5% or \$1000 matching fund requirement, whichever is less on each project.

Length of grant term will be no more than two (2) years and will be paid on a reimbursement basis at the end of the project, unless other arrangements are provided in the grant agreement.

Background

Created by the Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Act (525 ILCS 31/) on 8-25-2017, this opportunity is funded by a portion of the capital apportionment of the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund. The grant program created by the Act enjoyed strong stakeholder support from numerous environmental organizations in Illinois, most notably the Prairie State Conservation Coalition, an organization comprised of Conservation Land Trusts in Illinois. Grants must be used to perform approved stewardship actions on lands protected by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission as dedicated Nature Preserves or registered Land and Water Reserves. Grants may only be awarded to Conservation Land Trusts.

Available funding for the grant program will be determined annually by the Department but cannot exceed \$2,000,000 annually. Per statutory language, the grant program cannot adversely impact the Departmental operations funded by NAAF.

Eligible Lands

- Land dedicated by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission as an Illinois Nature Preserve, dedicated buffer, or registered as a Land and Water Reserve.

- Preserve/Reserve must have a current management schedule approved by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.
- Conservation Land Trusts can work on eligible land owned by another entity provided there is a properly executed agreement between the Conservation Land Trust and the landowner, and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission has been notified of this agreement at the time of application. The agreement must be in effect at minimum through the end of the grant term.

Eligible Project Expenses

Grant assistance may be obtained for the following activities:

1. Stewardship activities. Eligible projects include, but are not limited to, stewardship of land or water for the following:
 - a. Stewardship actions identified in an approved management schedule which are designed to maintain, preserve, or improve the condition of native natural communities, diversity of species, and ecological processes,
 - b. control of exotic and invasive species,
 - c. prescribed burns, or
 - d. restoration/enhancement of native plant communities.
2. Contractual services for any eligible project,
3. Purchase and rental of supplies and equipment such as:
 - a. UTVs, trailers, sprayers, seed, herbicide),
 - b. personal protection items (except boots),
 - c. hand tools,
 - d. radios,
4. Staff time (excluding benefits)
5. Indirect Costs

Goals of the Program

The overriding goal of the grant program is to increase the delivery of much needed stewardship activities to natural areas protected within the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission system. Stewardship needs on natural areas throughout the state have continued to outpace the ability to deliver these services by individuals, volunteers, organizations and government agencies. The Program is designed to fund projects that immediately address this deficiency and begin to expand on the stewardship capacity of Conservation Land Trusts through grants that will expand their staff and equipment for these activities.

Program Priorities

All eligible projects will be considered for funding in 2021. However, in the current year of the grant program, projects are encouraged that address both purposes of the Act:

- 1) Increase stewardship on dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves and registered Land and Water Reserves through grants to Conservation Land Trusts, and
- 2) Increase stewardship capacity within Conservation Land Trusts.

Additionally, there will be a focus on addressing the most urgent needs where the qualifying feature protected by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission is at risk of being lost.

Grant Program Rules and Guidelines

1. Applications will be screened for applicant eligibility.
2. Applicants must register in the Grant Accountability and Transparency Act (GATA) system prior to applying: <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/GATA/Pages/default.aspx>
3. Applications will be on a form provided by the Department
4. Applications must include:
 - a. Uniform Grant Application
 - b. Application Project Narrative (.docx) including the following:
 - i. Proposed Project Summary
 - ii. Need/ Context, including project location(s)
 - iii. Activities and Methods
 - iv. Alignment with statewide efforts
 1. Illinois Natural Areas Plan
 2. Illinois Sustainable Natural Areas Vision
 3. Illinois Wildlife Action Plan
 - c. Site Location Map(s)
 - d. For projects occurring on land not owned by the applicant, 1) a copy of the executed agreement between the Conservation Land Trust and the landowner, 2) a copy of the mail to the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission to demonstrate it was submitted
 - e. Uniform GATA Grant Budget. This includes an itemized budget and budget narrative.
 - f. Other items if applicable – visitor use, threat abatement, etc.
5. Other items to be used in the evaluation of projects will include:
 - a. Rarity and condition of the resource
 - b. Severity of stewardship need
 - c. Ability of applicant to complete the project
 - d. Increase in stewardship capacity of the applicant
 - e. Applicant's past performance (if available)
 - f. Matching funds
6. Grants are limited to an initial term of two (2) years. Justified requests for an extension received in writing 90 days prior to the end of the grant term may be granted by the Department.

Budget Guidelines

1. Equipment will be items or a group of items that make up one functional unit valued over \$5000.
2. Employee salary and indirect costs are allowed (no benefit costs). In order to charge indirect costs to a grant, the applicant organization must have an annually negotiated indirect cost rate agreement (NICRA). There are three types of NICRAs: a) Federally Negotiated Rate. Organizations that receive direct federal funding may have an indirect cost rate that was negotiated with the Federal Cognizant Agency. Illinois will accept the federally negotiated rate. The organization must provide a copy of the federally NICRA. b) State Negotiated Rate. The organization may negotiate an indirect cost rate with the State of Illinois if they do not have Federally Negotiated Rate or elect to use the De Minimis Rate. The indirect cost rate proposal must be submitted to the State of Illinois within 90 days of the notice of award. c) De Minimis Rate. An organization that does not have a current Federally Negotiated Rate may elect a de minimis rate of 10% of Modified Total Direct Cost (MTDC). Once established, the de minimis rate may be used indefinitely. Applicants may also elect not to include indirect in their grant budgets. Grantees must affirm their selection annually in a system supported by the Grant Accountability and Transparency Unit for the State of Illinois.

- a. Documentation of employee time must be hourly and include a description and location of the work for activities that can be matched to those described in the grant agreement.
3. Expenses prior to the grant term are not allowed.
4. By default, grant expenses will be paid on a reimbursement basis at the end of the project. Periodic payments, e.g., quarterly, are allowed if requested by the applicant and approved by the Department.

Match

Match is required on all projects. For this grant cycle, the Department will enforce the minimum match requirements allowed by rule of 5% or \$1000, whichever is less. This is being done to ensure that all land trusts, regardless of size and financial ability will have access to this program.

Project Evaluation Criteria

Department staff shall evaluate each application presented according to the following Project Evaluation Priorities and Criteria:

1. Project Target (40%) – Priority will be given to projects primarily designed to work on (in priority order):
 - a. INAI qualifying features for high quality natural community, specific suitable habitat for threatened and endangered species, or unusual species concentration.
 - b. Non INAI Lands or waters that meets the eligibility requirements for registration as a Land and Water Reserve (Section 4010.150, Title 17, Chapter V).
 - c. Other natural features included within the boundary of the dedicated or registered area.
 - d. Nature Preserve Buffer.
2. Project Activities (30%) – Priority will be given to projects primarily designed to (in priority order):
 - a. Maintain high quality natural communities, specific suitable habitat for threatened and endangered species, or unique species assemblages.
 - b. Restore degraded natural communities to a high quality, improve specific suitable habitat or unique species assemblage's habitat components.
 - c. Maintain, restore or recreate large habitat blocks supporting sensitive wildlife species of forest (100 acres), grasslands (80 acres), wetlands (50 acres), grade "C" restorable prairies (20 acres or 1 mile of railroad prairie).
 - d. Recreate natural communities or listed species habitat components.
 - e. Maintain, restore or recreate habitat for species in greatest conservation need or rare plants.
 - f. Maintain or restore significant archaeological resources.
 - g. Maintain or restore access to significant geologic features.
3. Rarity (15%) – Priority will be given to projects primarily designed to affect natural features with (in priority order):
 - a. Fewer than 5 occurrences statewide.
 - b. Between 6 -20 occurrences statewide.
 - c. Greater than 20 occurrences statewide.
4. Project Concept (5%) – Projects will be evaluated on the feasibility of the methods, budget and timeline to achieve the stated goals within the proposal as well as site intrusions, potential adverse impacts to cultural, natural resources or existing compatible uses and usage of other available resources.

5. Other considerations (5%) – the project supports other department statewide or regional priorities.
6. Penalty Factors (5%) – Consideration will be given to the applicant's past performance in completing Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Grant Program projects or other Department grant projects, unresolved project violations, ability to properly maintain the project site, or failure to cooperate with the Department in post project reporting.

Grant Consultations

No formal grant consultation process will be established, but staff from the Department's Office of Grant Management and Assistance, The Division of Natural Heritage and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission are available to address questions from applicants.

Release of Information

Application information cannot be kept confidential. Grant applications are considered public information under the Illinois Freedom of Information Act, 5 ILCS 140/2.5

Submission Instructions

Download an application form from our website:

<https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/grants/Pages/StewardshipGrants.aspx>

Email submission to Susan.Duke@Illinois.gov by May 28th, 2021 5pm.

Contact Information

For more information on the Natural Areas Stewardship Grant Program, contact:

Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Division of Natural Heritage
1 Natural Resources Way
Springfield, IL 62702

Email: Susan.Duke@Illinois.gov

Website: <https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/grants/Pages/StewardshipGrants.aspx>