

Impact Report

Minnesota, North Dakota
and South Dakota





Progress with purpose

Samuel H. Ordway, Jr. Memorial Preserve © Seth Owens

A note from the director

Dear friends,

As we approach 2030, I am encouraged by the momentum The Nature Conservancy is building for conservation across Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. The 2030 goals we've set for ourselves are ambitious—and they need to be. The challenges our region's lands and waters face require us to think bigger, work together and invest in solutions that last.

Thanks to supporters like you, we are making meaningful progress.

We are now **97% of the way toward our forest protection goal**, driven by major successes like the expansion of Minnesota's Sand Lake/Seven Beavers Preserve and the protection of nearly 1,000 acres at Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center. We have also reached **73% of our tree-planting goal**, and planted more than 3.2 million seedlings across northern Minnesota in 2026 alone.

Across our grasslands, we have achieved **44% of our protection goal** by working alongside private landowners, agencies and partners to conserve native prairie and working ranchlands. In our freshwater

systems, we have reached **19% of our river and stream restoration goal**. We're building momentum on major restoration projects with partners, from reconnecting fish habitat in the Mississippi headwaters to advancing river and wetland restoration efforts across the region.

We have also achieved **17% of our farmland improvement goal**. While there is much more work ahead, we are laying the foundation for lasting change by training conservation agronomists, advancing soil health standards and working with partners across the supply chain to support healthier soils and cleaner water.

The stories you'll read reflect both the progress we've made and the opportunities ahead. Together, we're protecting the lands and waters that sustain us while building a more resilient future for generations to come.

With gratitude,



Ann Mulholland

Chapter Director, TNC in Minnesota,
North Dakota and South Dakota

Grasslands

Goal: Conserve 250,000 acres of grasslands and steward another 250,000 acres with prescribed fire.

Reconnecting Minnesota prairie

In June, The Nature Conservancy and Pheasants Forever permanently protected 1,900 acres of grassland in Minnesota near Fargo-Moorhead. The multi-partner project reconnects more than seven miles of habitat in one of Minnesota's highest-priority prairie conservation areas.

The land includes 530 acres of native prairie and supports rare and declining species, including the greater prairie-chicken, Baird's sparrow and Dakota skipper. The acquisition expands TNC's Blazing Star Prairie Preserve, creates a new state Wildlife Management Area and adds to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) lands. The land is open for recreation, hunting and birding and TNC will collaborate with partners on restoration efforts.

Working lands, lasting conservation

Across South Dakota, voluntary land protection agreements support working farms and ranches while keeping wetlands and grasslands intact. These lands provide clean water, carbon storage and habitat for wildlife like meadowlarks, mallards, monarch butterflies and pronghorn.

Through these voluntary agreements and in partnership with USFWS, TNC has helped conserve more than 100,000 acres of prairie and wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region in eastern South Dakota. Due to strong landowner interest, TNC employs conservation technicians who help landowners enroll in the program.

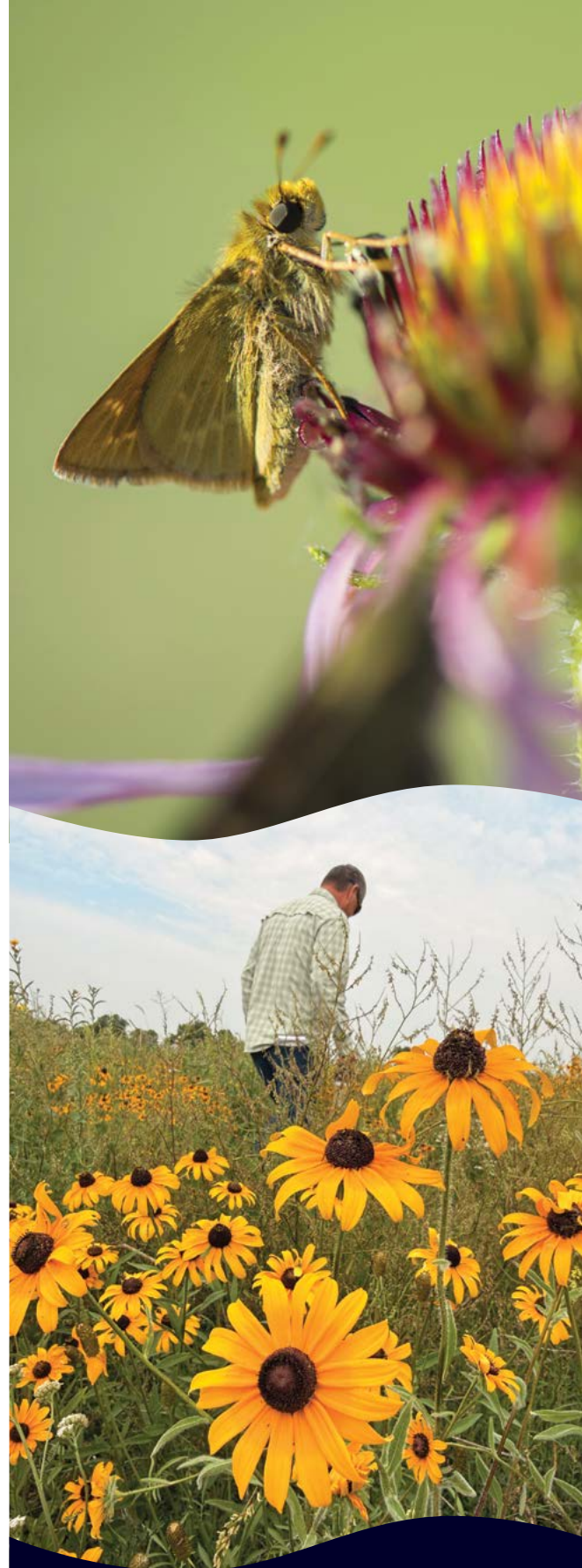
In western South Dakota, TNC was awarded \$19.6 million through USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program to protect high-priority grasslands facing pressure from conversion and development. These agreements will conserve roughly 20,000 acres of working grasslands.

Restoring resilience at Knife River

Healthy grasslands depend on diversity. Near Stanton, North Dakota, TNC and the National Park Service (NPS) are restoring 60 acres of grassland at Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site to improve habitat and strengthen ecosystem resilience.

We removed invasive species from the site and then planted it with diverse native grasses and wildflowers. Researchers are comparing two restoration approaches, one using a traditional seed mix and another that includes greater species diversity, to better understand how plant diversity influences restoration.

TNC and NPS also welcomed natural resource professionals to the site to exchange ideas and learn about restoration approaches.



Top: The newly protected land in Clay County is a stronghold for grassland species like the Dakota skipper, an endangered butterfly in Minnesota. © Layne Kennedy

Bottom: The Knife River restoration site was in its second growing season this year, with native plants like this black-eyed susan in full bloom. © Rachel Bush/TNC

Forests

Goal: Plant 17.5 million trees across northern Minnesota and protect 15,000 acres of forest.

Protecting our Northwoods

At the end of 2025, TNC completed its largest land acquisition in Minnesota in 25 years, protecting more than 12,000 acres north of Two Harbors.

The acquisition nearly triples the size of our Sand Lake/Seven Beavers Preserve and connects it to a 40,000-acre network of protected forests, wetlands and streams. Moose, wolves, migratory songbirds and other wildlife can move freely across this connected habitat, strengthening their ability to adapt and thrive in a changing climate. More than 5,000 acres of high-quality, carbon-rich peatlands also support rare species, help filter water and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Another addition to our network of protected Northwoods land came in June, when TNC partnered with Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center to place a conservation easement on 928 acres of Wolf Ridge's land. The easement protects parts of the Baptism River watershed and provides high-quality habitat for wildlife. It also ensures that future generations of students can continue learning, exploring and building connections with nature for years to come.

Planting tomorrow's forests

Crews planted 3.2 million tree seedlings across northern Minnesota this spring—TNC's largest planting season yet.

The trees were planted on 5,586 acres of public land, including the Superior and Chippewa national forests, state forests and county lands. Planting sites included areas recovering from intense wildfires, along scenic Highway 61 and 15 miles of trout streams, and in forests impacted by disease or pests such as spruce budworm or emerald ash borer.

Since 2005, TNC has planted 16.2 million trees in Minnesota to strengthen forest resilience, improve wildlife habitat, protect water quality and help forests regenerate. We plant twenty different native and climate-adapted species like white pine, white spruce, red pine, red oak, jack pine, white cedar, paper birch and yellow birch. To help prepare forests for a changing climate, some seedlings are sourced from areas farther south, where conditions resemble those northern Minnesota is expected to face in coming decades.

By planting millions of trees and increasing forest diversity, we can help forests recover from today's challenges and support healthier, more resilient forests in the future.



Top: Sand Lake/Seven Beavers Preserve now spans more than 18,000 acres of forest and wetlands near Two Harbors. © Ellie Scholtz/TNC

Middle: Wolf Ridge welcomes thousands of students and visitors each year for hands-on outdoor learning. © Wolf Ridge

Bottom: TNC focuses on planting trees in areas that need it most—including burn areas that need help regenerating. © Derek Montgomery

Fresh water

Goal: Reconnect and restore 1,500 miles of rivers and streams. Improve soil health on 15 million acres to store water and reduce runoff. Protect and restore 300,000 acres of wetlands, including peatlands.

A river reconnected

Healthy rivers depend on connected habitat. That's why TNC restores rivers to improve water quality and support native fish populations.

This year, TNC partnered with Cass County and the U.S. Forest Service to help construct a fish passage structure at Girl Lake in Minnesota's Mississippi River headwaters area. The project replaced a barrier that had blocked fish movement for more than 70 years, reconnecting 73 miles of river habitat. Nearly 40 fish species and other aquatic organisms can now move through this watershed.

Additional fish passage projects are ongoing in Minnesota and North Dakota and aim to reconnect nearly 3,000 miles of river habitat.

Bringing wetlands back

Wetlands help reduce flooding, filter clean water, store carbon and support wildlife. Across the Mississippi River headwaters area, TNC works with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited, seven Soil and Water Conservation Districts and private landowners to restore these important ecosystems.

Since 2020, TNC and partners have restored 121 wetlands in Minnesota, totaling 928 acres. In the past year alone, we restored 46 wetlands across 158 acres. These restored wetlands will help slow flooding, recharge groundwater and help wildlife thrive. Working alongside willing landowners, TNC and partners are bringing back natural systems that support healthier land, cleaner water and more resilient communities.

Healthy soil, cleaner water

Farmers help protect Minnesota's water resources, and TNC works with producers across the state to advance conservation solutions.

This year, TNC conducted a study for the Minnesota Department of Agriculture examining nutrient management programs nationwide, identifying opportunities to improve nutrient stewardship and water quality. TNC also commissioned research on opportunities to diversify crop rotations in southern Minnesota through increased oat production, finding that stronger markets are needed to make these environmentally beneficial rotations economically viable for farmers.

Our conservation agronomist program also laid the groundwork to reach more farmers through agricultural retailers across the Upper Midwest. TNC equips these trusted advisors with the education and resources they need to support farmers in adopting conservation practices.



Top: The new rock arch rapid fish passage at Girl Lake reconnects the Boy River to the watershed. © Steve Herrington/TNC

Middle: Landowner Mike Niziolek holds a jar of water teeming with aquatic life from his restored wetland. © Derek Montgomery

Bottom: Planting cover crops is a popular conservation practice that helps control erosion and improve soil health. © Stan Tekiela



Indigenous Right Relations & partnerships

Conservation is strongest when it reflects the knowledge and stewardship of the people who have cared for our lands and waters since time immemorial. Across Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota, TNC is working to build relationships with Native Nations that are grounded in listening, learning and respect.

Partnering for peatlands

Minnesota contains more peatlands than any state in the lower 48, making these carbon-rich, wildlife-filled wetlands a high conservation priority. This year, TNC advanced peatland protection and restoration through science, planning and collaboration with Tribal Nations and government agencies, including co-hosting a Tribal peatland restoration workshop to help partners plan projects and access state funding.

We are also strengthening our partnership with the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe to support their peatland restoration priorities. With support from TNC's global peatlands program and the Everpure Foundation, we provided \$120,000 for monitoring equipment and seasonal staff, helping expand the Band's wetland and peatland program.

Monitoring manoomin

TNC is a partner on the Collaborative State and Tribal Wild Rice Monitoring Program, which is developing and coordinating methods to track the abundance and distribution of manoomin (wild rice) across Minnesota. The program brings together Tribal, state and partner expertise while expanding the use of tools such as drones to better understand the status and trends of manoomin and support informed management, restoration and protection.

We also participate in Kawe Gidaa-naanaagadawendaamin Manoomin ("First We Must Consider Manoomin"), a university-Tribal partnership that centers Tribal knowledge, perspectives and priorities in manoomin research and engagement.

Learning through fire

This year, several Tribes invited TNC staff to contribute to wildland fire priorities. At the White Earth Reservation, Tribal leaders, Tribal college staff, traditional knowledge keepers and fire practitioners came together for a weeklong training that blended a federal wildland fire curriculum with Indigenous knowledge, language, stories and cultural teachings.

Following the training, White Earth invited TNC to participate in annual village burns that help protect communities before wildfire season. The experience underscored the importance of supporting Tribal stewardship practices and creating opportunities for knowledge-sharing across generations.



Top: Peatlands are home to unique flora and fauna, including pitcher plants, a carnivorous plant with leaves designed to trap and digest bugs to survive in the nutrient-poor peat soils. © Kent Mason

Bottom: Tribal members harvest wild rice on Lower Rice Lake. Minnesota's lakes and rivers support an estimated 64,000 acres of wild rice—more than any other state in the country. © Jenn Ackerman and Tim Gruber

Policy

Finding common ground

Conservation success depends not only on work in the field but also on strong, science-based public policy.

In **Minnesota**, lawmakers approved nearly \$300 million for conservation through the Outdoor Heritage Fund and Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. These investments will support habitat restoration, clean water and outdoor recreation for years to come. During the legislative session, advocates like you sent 2,142 letters to lawmakers, helping us advocate for continued investment in land and water conservation.

In **South Dakota**, policymakers invested \$8 million in the state's Riparian Buffer Initiative, advancing efforts to improve water quality and watershed health. State leaders also approved measures to support the use of prescribed fire as a tool for controlling invasive eastern red cedar, one of the most significant threats to grassland ecosystems in the region. Additional resolutions highlighted the importance of habitat conservation in the Black Hills and monarch butterfly recovery efforts.

In **North Dakota**, TNC continued working with partners and decision-makers to support the state's Outdoor Heritage Fund and advocate for continued investment in conservation programs that benefit recreation, wildlife, water quality and local communities.

Policy remains one of the most powerful tools available for addressing conservation challenges at scale. Whether it involves protecting grasslands, improving forest resilience, restoring freshwater systems or supporting climate adaptation, public policy helps make lasting conservation possible. TNC remains committed to advancing practical, nonpartisan solutions rooted in science and informed by local communities.



Les Gonyer is a retired hydrologist with the U.S. Forest Service and enjoys spending time with his daughter and grandson at TNC's Whitney Preserve in South Dakota. After decades of federal service, he knows how important it is to protect our lands and waters for generations to come. © Alex Wiles

Thank you!

This year, your support helped plant millions of trees, restore wetlands, reconnect rivers and protect prairies across Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

As we work toward our 2030 goals, your partnership makes this progress possible. TNC is marking its 75th anniversary as a global organization this year, and we're celebrating the impact that supporters like you have made possible across generations.

If you'd like to help accelerate this work, please consider making a gift by mail, by contacting us at **612-331-0700** or at nature.org/tristateimpact.



GOOD FIRE | In the last year, TNC assisted or led on more than 38,000 acres of controlled burns in grassland and forest habitats across our three states. © Old Saw Media



PRAIRIE LOOKOUT | Ordway Prairie Preserve in Minnesota has a new pavilion and interpretive signage at its prairie overlook, helping visitors connect with the area's deep ecological and human history. © Ellie Scholtz/TNC



BOOMING BISON

Cross Ranch Preserve in North Dakota celebrated 40 years of stewarding bison. Since 2020, we have worked with the InterTribal Buffalo Council to transfer 255 buffalo to Tribal Nations across the United States from our herds in the Dakotas. © Richard Hamilton Smith



GOING GREEN | TNC completed a new fossil fuel-free stewardship building at Bluestem Prairie in Minnesota. It runs on a 36 kW solar array and will save on energy bills and pollute less while our staff work to restore more prairie. © Minko Construction



NATIVE FISH | TNC joined partners to celebrate Gov. Walz's Native Fish Day proclamation on May 8, 2026. TNC helped pass legislation protecting native rough fish in 2024. © Steve Herrington/TNC



The Nature Conservancy

in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota



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Learn more or make a gift at
nature.org/tristateimpact.

Membership questions?
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