

# Impact Report

Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota





Blazing star blooms at the Bluestem Prairie Scientific and Natural Area in Clay County, Minnesota. © Richard Hamilton Smith

# Making an Impact

## A Note from the Director

This year brought exciting milestones, new challenges and a sense of renewed commitment to our mission. I'm inspired by the donors, partners, landowners, farmers, ranchers and legislators we work with who recognize the value of conservation and continue to speak up for nature.

We're reflecting on our progress toward our bold 2030 goals to slow and reverse the climate and biodiversity crises. We have a long way to go, but we've accomplished so much.

Our Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota chapter recently hit an incredible milestone: we have worked with partners and private landowners to protect **1 million acres across our three states**, including 712,247 acres in Minnesota, 51,440 acres in North Dakota and 236,313 acres in South Dakota. Most of this land—88%—is not under The Nature Conservancy's ownership. Instead, it's conserved as state and local parks, national wildlife refuges, working lands in private ownership, and acres stewarded by Native Nations.

As I reflect on the moments that have led to this milestone, it's clear that our work is only possible through strong partnerships, the support of donors like you and vital public investments in conservation.

In the following pages, you'll learn more about some of the projects your support has made possible this year, including:

- **2.5 million trees planted** in Minnesota's Northwoods
- **200,000 acres of prairie restorations** surpassed as part of our prairie recovery program
- **25,000 acres of controlled burns** across Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota

Now, more than ever, we must find ways to work together—to find common ground in nature. Our science-based, nonpartisan approach has stood the test of time and we're drawing on these strengths to find new, durable solutions. I'm confident that we can achieve a future where people and nature thrive together.

Thank you for your generosity, partnership and dedication to a better future. Your support is making an enduring impact.



**Ann Mulholland**

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



# Grasslands

**Goal:** Conserve 100 million acres of Great Plains grasslands—from Canada to Texas—through protection and improved management.

## Restoring a Prairie Legacy

Grasslands once stretched unimpeded across the Great Plains, providing habitat for wildlife, storing vast amounts of carbon, filtering clean water, supplying nutrition to livestock, and offering rich opportunities for recreation. Yet much of these original grasslands have been lost to agriculture and development, which is why TNC is working to protect and restore what remains.

In Minnesota, where approximately 1% of the original native prairie remains, TNC is advancing grassland conservation through partnerships and hands-on restoration. In collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we've added more than **9,000 acres to the Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge** using Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) dollars. The refuge—which celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year—now spans more than 15,000 acres across 85 counties in Minnesota and Iowa. TNC works closely with private landowners to place conservation easements on their land to protect and restore the rapidly disappearing tallgrass prairie.

Additionally, this year, our OHF-funded Minnesota Prairie Recovery Program surpassed **200,000 acres of restored prairie on protected lands**. These enhancement projects increase native species diversity and improve critical wildlife habitat with tools such as controlled burns, invasive species removal, conservation grazing and planting native seeds.

## Buffalo Returning Home

TNC also partners with InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) and Tanka Fund on an Indigenous-led initiative to return buffalo to ancestral grazing lands. Buffalo—a keystone species in grasslands—play a crucial role in spiritual and cultural revitalization, ecological restoration and conservation, food sovereignty, health and economic development for Indigenous Peoples.

Buffalo help build resilience in grasslands. Their hooves work the ground to create space for new plants to grow, their dropping provide nutrients for soil microorganisms, and native grass seeds stick to their fur and disperse across the land. Their grazing behavior and impacts they have on the prairie help a wide range of wildflowers, plants, insects and amphibians to flourish.

Since 2020, these partnerships have facilitated **the return of more than 2,300 buffalo** to ITBC Member Nations and Tanka Fund caretakers, including those in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.



Black-eyed Susan blooms on a restored prairie © Grayson Smith/USFWS



Buffalo on a ranch in South Dakota © Joe Dickie



# Forests

**Goal:** Conserve 2 million acres of resilient Minnesota forests through large-scale planting, protection and beneficial fire.

## Planting 2.5 Million Trees

Minnesota's forests are vital to our air, water, wildlife and economy—but they're under threat from climate change, pests, wildfires and development. Nearly half of the state's forested acres have been lost in the past two centuries, and what remains often lacks the resilience needed to thrive in a changing climate.

We are working with partners to restore and protect these forests by planting and managing a diverse mix of climate-resilient tree species that support healthy ecosystems.

This spring, **TNC planted more than 2.5 million trees** across 5,810 acres and along 41 miles of waterways in northern Minnesota—all on public lands and in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and several counties. In total we have planted **13.2 million trees** in Minnesota since 2005!



© Ian Shive

## Community-Driven Forest Management

In northeast Minnesota, fire—started by lightning strikes or by Indigenous fire practitioners—once played a vital role in sustaining healthy, diverse forests. These burns cleared dense undergrowth and provided a seedbed and sunlight for white and red pine. But more than a century of fire suppression, combined with a recent spruce budworm outbreak, has left forests full of dense, dry undergrowth that is increasingly vulnerable to severe wildfires.

The Nature Conservancy is partnering with state and federal agencies and Native Nations to **reintroduce fire to these fire-dependent ecosystems**. In the past year, TNC has helped restore fire to 700 acres in the Northwoods, building forest resilience and improving habitat for key species like moose, bears and wolves. Around Ely, where nearly 70% of land is privately owned, TNC helps landowners reduce wildfire risk by connecting them to resources for controlled burning and selective cutting. In the last year, we've helped host 18 community workshops and events on wildfire prevention and preparedness.

TNC's tree-planting work would not be possible without hardworking guest workers. © Ian Shive

More than 60% of forests in northeast Minnesota are fire-dependent. © Old Saw Media



# Fresh Water

**Goals:** Across MN, ND and SD, 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 peatlands.

## Wetlands at Work

Wetlands are nature's multi-taskers—preventing flooding, storing carbon, filtering pollution and providing habitat for birds, fish and other wildlife.

In southwestern Minnesota, a quiet comeback is underway in prairie wetlands known as oxbows, where the tiny, endangered Topeka shiner is making a return. In partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), TNC has contributed to the **protection and restoration of 130 oxbows** benefiting the Topeka shiner and 30 other fish species.

In the Mississippi headwaters, TNC and USFWS are working with private landowners to restore wetlands for clean water, wildlife habitat and flood prevention. After completing 72 restorations in the last five years, TNC and USFWS ramped up efforts and completed **75 more** in this past year alone.

## Restoring Rivers, Rebuilding Resilience

The Nature Conservancy is reconnecting and restoring rivers and streams across Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota to improve the health of these freshwater systems and the wildlife and people that depend on them.

In southeastern Minnesota, TNC is partnering with the Department of Natural Resources to improve heritage brook trout habitat. Along Vesta Creek, we re-sloped steep banks to connect the river to its floodplain, and volunteers helped plant more than **5,000 climate-adapted shrubs** to prevent erosion.

At the Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve, TNC and the University of Minnesota are preparing to reshape more than 4,000 feet of stream with natural meanders and restore degraded wetlands and peatlands.

## Agriculture in Focus

To improve water quality in Minnesota and downstream, we must improve the resilience of agricultural lands. Guided by science and propelled by strong partnerships, TNC is supporting the transition to regenerative farming practices that restore our precious soil by collaborating with partners at every level of the agricultural supply chain.

This year, our team helped **train a new generation of conservation agronomists** at farmer co-ops. They are advising farmers on changes to their operations with both agronomic and environmental benefits. And our approach is spreading. Other co-ops across the state have hired conservation agronomists of their own, proving that Minnesota's farmers have an appetite for restorative practices.



Wetland restoration in progress near Elk River, Minnesota. © Derek Montgomery



Volunteers plant climate-adapted shrubs at Vesta Creek. © Bill Allen



# Climate & Science

## Partnerships for Peatlands

Peatlands are strange and spectacular wetlands—home to carnivorous plants and spongy mats of sphagnum moss, steeped in acidic groundwater. They're also one of nature's best tools to fight climate change, **storing about 30% of the world's carbon**—more than twice as much as forests. Minnesota has more peatlands than any other state in the lower 48, but many have been ditched and drained for agriculture, forestry and other land uses.

The Nature Conservancy is leveraging its scientific expertise and strong partnerships to work with Native Nations and government agencies to protect and restore these ecosystems. This year, TNC released the Playbook for Minnesota Peatlands, a report that compiles the best available science and knowledge. It outlines a path to restoring and protecting peatlands, informing policy, and guiding partners and restoration practitioners.


TNC is also gearing up to support partners on several new peatland restoration projects at key sites in northern Minnesota. We'll start by measuring hydrology, greenhouse gas emission reductions and species diversity to establish a baseline for comparison after restoration efforts are underway.

## Maximizing Impact

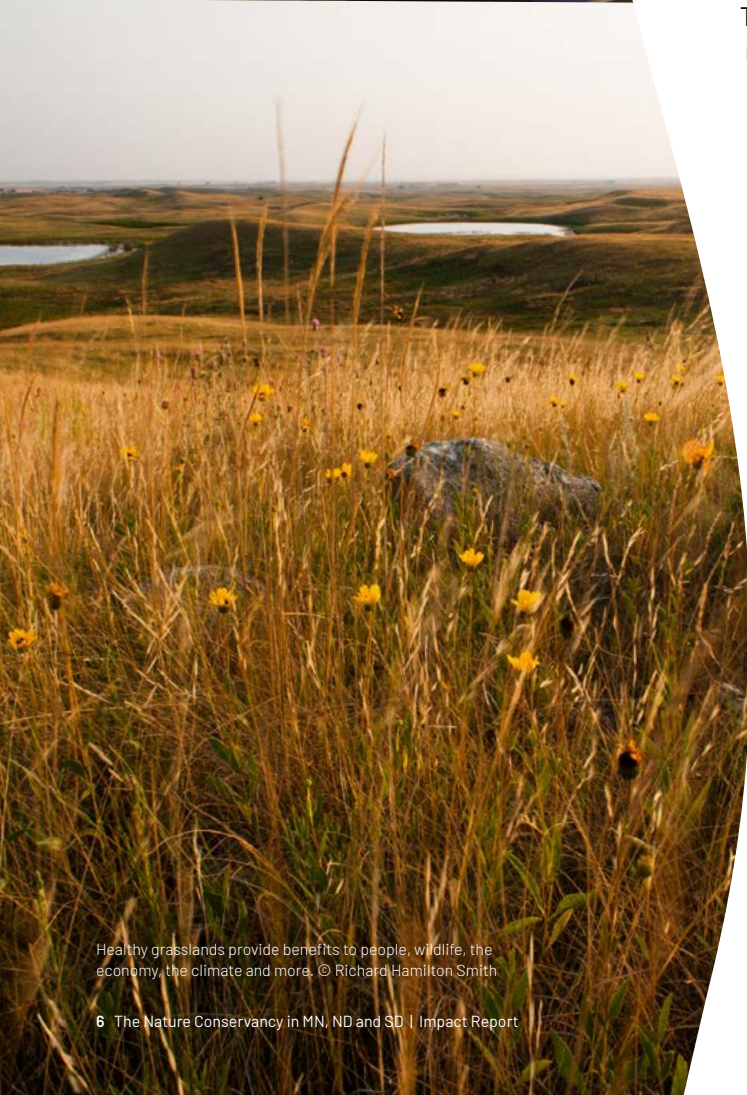
One of The Nature Conservancy's greatest strengths is bringing partners together to scale conservation impact. This year, TNC scientists completed **climate adaptation plans for five key landscapes** across Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. The plans outline restoration approaches that help ecosystems adapt to climate change and guide coordinated action among partners.

TNC also led an advisory group with the Midwest Climate Adaptation Science Center to develop new maps identifying restoration opportunities that benefit habitat connectivity and the ecosystem services these areas provide—like carbon, water quality and pollination services. These maps illustrate “stacked benefits” and help demonstrate the full value of restoration, especially in often-overlooked landscapes like grasslands.

By combining high-quality data, strategic planning, and strong partnerships, TNC is helping ensure that conservation efforts deliver the greatest possible benefits for both people and nature.



A TNC researcher wades through a ditch that drains a peatland. © Derek Montgomery



Healthy grasslands provide benefits to people, wildlife, the economy, the climate and more. © Richard Hamilton Smith



# Policy

## For People and Nature

We saw big wins for dedicated conservation funding in **Minnesota** this year. In November, voters overwhelmingly renewed the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) for another 25 years. Since 1988, the ENRTF has provided more than \$1 billion in state lottery proceeds to help protect our great outdoors—and thanks to your support, that legacy will continue!

During the **Minnesota** legislative session, advocacy from The Nature Conservancy and supporters like you helped secure \$600 million in funding for conservation from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment and the ENRTF. TNC also supported—and voters approved—the creation of a new Community Grants program as part of the ENRTF that is aimed at making this funding more accessible to communities that have historically faced greater environmental degradation and impacts.

In **North Dakota**, legislators approved \$15 million for the Outdoor Heritage Fund for the next two years. This funding will support projects that expand wildlife habitat, improve water quality and provide access to outdoor recreation. TNC also provided input on improvements to a program that gives wind energy developers the option to contribute to an environmental mitigation fund, which now includes the option to purchase conservation easements in habitat similar to that affected by development.

In **South Dakota**, the approved state budget included increases to key state agencies focused on environmental management, including the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Department of Game, Fish and Parks. TNC also joined a diverse set of partners to oppose a bill that could have blocked individuals and organizations from owning land for the purpose of fostering benefits like biodiversity, water quality and soil health.

Policy makes conservation possible, and TNC is committed to advancing science-based, nonpartisan conservation policy. Supporters like you sent 2,182 letters to state lawmakers across our three states during the 2025 sessions. Thank you for advocating for the future of people and nature!

### Thank You!

You made these wins for people and nature possible.

Every tree planted, acre protected and fragment of prairie restored is because of **you**. Your impact on Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota is immeasurable, and we need your continued support as we navigate the future together.

Visit [nature.org/tristateimpact](https://nature.org/tristateimpact) to make a gift.



A cow moose with a calf © Mark Godfrey





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# The Nature Conservancy

in Minnesota, North Dakota  
and South Dakota

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Learn more at [nature.org/tristateimpact](https://www.nature.org/tristateimpact).

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