

## Minnesota DNR: 2021 Drought Assistance Proposal

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) proposes \$13.3 million in funding in response to the significant adverse effects of the drought on two of the state's critical natural resources: water and trees. While drought is a natural process and can provide ecological benefits, it also stresses both natural resources and our systems for managing those resources. This was certainly the case with the 2021 drought. The DNR took necessary steps to mitigate the drought's impacts, in accordance with the Statewide Drought Plan, but more needs to be done.

The drought has stressed well-established shade trees in communities and caused an extremely high mortality rate for tree seedlings planted in 2021. The DNR proposes \$5.5 million to re-plant public and private forest lands where seedlings were irrevocably damaged by the drought and \$4.5 million in community shade tree grants. Additionally, the proposal includes \$3 million in funding for municipal, tribal, and other community water suppliers to implement proactive water conservation measures, and \$300,000 for an individual and small community well interference fund. This funding proposal is important to proactive and long-term conservation of water and to support tree health, carbon storage, habitat, and water quality in Minnesota.

### Addressing Drought-Induced Seedling Mortality (*\$5.5 million*)

The 2021 drought has severely impacted recent reforestation efforts on state, tribal, county and private forest lands. The DNR estimates mortality of 72 percent for conifer plantings less than four years old. Field monitoring conducted this summer revealed seedling mortality of 100 percent on some DNR sites.

The DNR proposal would provide \$2.75 million to replace seedlings that didn't survive the drought on DNR-managed lands and \$2.75 million to develop and implement a pass-through grant program to assist tribal, county, and private forest owners who are also faced with drought-related reforestation needs. DNR requests that funding be available for four years to allow time to grow replacement seedlings, develop the grant criteria and process for the pass-through grant program, and prepare sites and execute the replanting. This proposal provides necessary funding to ensure Minnesota's young forests continue to grow by replanting 6.8 million drought-damaged seedlings.

*Photos of drought-damaged tree seedlings are available in DNR's media library.*

### Community Drought ReLeaf Grants (*\$4.5 million*)

Trees become stressed during times of drought, leaving them more susceptible to damage from pests and disease. This, on top of the ongoing challenge of emerald ash borer, makes it essential that local and tribal governments have access to technical and financial support to replace shade trees and maintain vital community forests. In recent years, the DNR has seen great demand for shade tree grants to communities, with requests far outpacing available funding. The 2021 drought will only add to that need.

The DNR proposes that an additional \$4.5 million be made available for shade tree grants to communities to replace drought-stressed trees and provide tree watering bags and equipment to support tree survival in the future. This four-year effort would allow time for communities to assess how the drought has affected their forests and apply for assistance accordingly.

## **Water Conservation Grants (\$3 million)**

Times of drought remind us all of the importance of water. To prepare for the next drought, communities can take high-impact measures now to conserve significant amounts of water, sometimes in the range of millions of gallons a year.

The DNR proposes \$3 million in funding for municipal, tribal, and other community water suppliers to implement proactive water conservation measures in their own infrastructure, and to incentivize their residential and business customers to install water-efficient equipment. Some potential projects that could be funded through these water conservation grants include:

- Finding and repairing leaks.
- Incentivizing residential and business customers to install water-saving devices.
- Increasing irrigation efficiency for both municipal and residential systems.
- Education campaigns geared toward residents to promote conservation actions.

## **Individual/Small Community Well Interference (\$300,000)**

During times of drought, a domestic or municipal well may run out of water due to nearby high-capacity groundwater users. This is termed a “well interference”. Through September 2021, 22 domestic well interferences were officially reported to the DNR, but many more “out of water” calls were received. It takes time for the DNR to investigate and confirm the cause of a well interference, which can create delays in resolving the situation. Meanwhile, owners and municipalities incur costs to repair wells, lower pumps, or drill new wells, costs which can range from \$2,000 to more than \$10,000.

The DNR proposes \$300,000 in funding to reimburse or directly pay corrective action costs incurred by domestic well owners and municipalities to resolve well interference problems in a rapid, efficient, and equitable manner.