

Aggregate Mining Operations

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	<p>Aggregate mining is the extraction of sand, gravel, and crushed stone for use in a wide variety of construction projects. The Environmental Quality Board (EQB) requires local governments to conduct environmental reviews of certain proposed aggregate mining projects. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) issues water quality permits for extractive industries such as aggregate mining.</p>
Original Evaluation Questions	<p>What is the process for establishing aggregate mining sites, and which agencies are involved in this process? Which agencies oversee established aggregate mining sites, and what are their responsibilities? To what extent have aggregate mining sites complied with applicable regulations and standards?</p>
Revised Questions	<p><i>Proposed revision to the final question:</i> To what extent have EQB and MPCA ensured that aggregate mining sites have complied with applicable regulations and standards?</p>
State Resources <i>Low</i>	<p>The exact amount MPCA spends on water permitting for aggregate mining is unclear, but in Fiscal Year 2022 the Industrial Division (which includes aggregate mining) expended \$18.9 million. EQB expenditures in Fiscal Year 2022 were \$1.3 million.</p>
State Control <i>Medium-High</i>	<p>The state has the authority to regulate aggregate mining through environmental review and wastewater permitting requirements (the latter of which is also subject to federal regulation through the Clean Water Act). Counties, townships, and municipalities also have authority to regulate extractive industries through zoning ordinances.</p>
Impact <i>Medium</i>	<p>A Department of Natural Resources (DNR) mapping project in 25 Minnesota counties has identified nearly 500 active aggregate mining sites. The total number of active aggregate mining sites is likely higher when taking into account sites in the 62 other Minnesota counties not included in this project. Although aggregate mining does not produce the hazardous byproducts that accompany the extraction of other minerals, the associated physical disturbances can damage sensitive ecosystems.</p>
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	<p>With Minnesota projected to add about 850,000 new residents by 2070, demand for new construction and the required aggregates will likely be strong.</p>
Feasibility <i>Medium</i>	<p>OLA could complete this evaluation using traditional evaluation methods. However, OLA would not evaluate the technical aspects of individual site permitting and compliance.</p>
Balance <i>Medium-High</i>	<p>OLA evaluated MPCA’s petroleum remediation program in 2022 and examined MPCA’s oversight of Water Gremlin in 2021. OLA last evaluated environmental review and permitting in 2011.</p>
Discussion <i>Important topic</i>	<p>Aggregate mining is an important industry in Minnesota and will likely remain so into the future. Given the number of aggregate mining sites in the state and their potential impacts on sensitive ecosystems and water resources, an evaluation could provide important insight on an issue that affects people across Minnesota.</p>

Broadband Development

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Office of Broadband Development within the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) administers federal and state grants that promote adequate internet access for all Minnesotans. The 2016 Legislature set a statutory goal that, by 2026, all Minnesota homes and businesses should have access to a broadband provider offering adequate upload and download speeds.
Original Evaluation Questions	To what extent has the funding to develop broadband infrastructure been awarded competitively and through a transparent process? What has been the overall process for developing broadband across the state, and has it utilized the most current technology?
Revised Questions	To what extent has state funding to develop broadband infrastructure been awarded competitively and through a transparent process? What processes has DEED’s Office of Broadband Development used to develop broadband across the state? What strategies has DEED’s Office of Broadband Development used to work toward statutory broadband goals?
State Resources <i>Medium</i>	The 2023 Legislature appropriated \$75 million for Fiscal Year 2024 and \$50 million for Fiscal Year 2025 for two grant programs that help provide broadband services to unserved and underserved communities.
State Control <i>High</i>	The Minnesota Legislature established and controls state-funded broadband infrastructure grant programs.
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	About 90 percent of Minnesotans already have access to adequate broadband speeds. However, Minnesotans who lack broadband access may have difficulty obtaining important online services in fields such as health care or social services. Gaps in broadband access can limit economic opportunities in unserved or underserved communities.
Timeliness <i>High</i>	The issue of broadband access has arguably become even more pressing since the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to its 2026 goal, the Legislature set statutory goals that Minnesota would be a leader in broadband speeds and access by 2022; however, the state did not meet these goals. In 2023, the federal government awarded Minnesota over \$650 million for broadband infrastructure projects.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	OLA could evaluate the Office of Broadband Development’s management of its grant programs and statewide broadband access projects using standard evaluation techniques.
Balance <i>Medium</i>	OLA has not previously conducted an evaluation on the Office of Broadband Development. However, OLA has evaluated different DEED functions in recent years.
Discussion <i>Timely opportunity</i>	Minnesota did not meet its 2022 broadband goals, and it is unclear whether the state is on track to meet its goals for 2026. This may be a good time for OLA to assess the state’s efforts.

Community Benefit Expenditures at Nonprofit Hospitals

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	Nonprofit hospitals must provide “community benefits” in exchange for federal tax-exempt status. Community benefits include free or reduced-cost patient care services that are intended to promote community health. Minnesota statutes also allow tax exemptions on many purchases for nonprofit hospitals that operate for charitable purposes.
Original Evaluation Questions	What tax exemptions exist for nonprofit hospitals in Minnesota? How much do these exemptions cost the state? How does the amount of community benefit spending compare to the tax exemptions given to tax-exempt hospitals? To what extent are community benefit expenditures reflective of actual costs accrued by reporting organizations? To what extent is there an association between reported community benefit expenditures and health outcomes? What percentage of community benefit spending is dedicated to charity care? What changes could be made to community benefit and other tax-exempt reporting to better address community health needs?
Revised Questions	How does the amount of community benefit spending compare to the tax exemptions given to tax-exempt hospitals? What percentage of community benefit spending is dedicated to charity care? What changes could be made to community benefit and other tax-exempt reporting to better address community health needs?
State Resources <i>High</i>	According to the Minnesota Department of Health’s (MDH’s) most recent relevant report, published in 2007, nonprofit hospitals received \$225.9 million in state and local tax-exemptions.
State Control <i>Medium</i>	Federal law establishes the “community benefit standard” to determine if a hospital operates for charitable purposes and is eligible to receive federal tax exemption. Hospitals must report spending on community benefits to the federal government annually. State law also requires annual reports and provides more detailed requirements.
Impact <i>High</i>	Community benefits can improve access to care and enhance community health. In a 2021 survey, about 20 percent of Minnesotans said they went without care due to the cost of health care, and about 4 percent of Minnesotans are uninsured. In 2021, Minnesota nonprofit hospitals reported almost \$1.4 billion in community benefit expenditures.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	While OLA could provide updated information about community benefit expenditures in Minnesota, there is a not a compelling reason to do so this year.
Feasibility <i>Low</i>	As proposed, the scope of this evaluation is not feasible. OLA could likely make only limited progress on answering a select number of questions prior to the next legislative session.
Balance <i>High</i>	OLA has not previously evaluated or audited nonprofit hospital community benefit expenditures.
Discussion <i>Better suited for other entities</i>	The proposed evaluation questions are more consistent with academic research than a program evaluation. OLA could answer certain questions posed, but MDH published a report in 2007 addressing similar questions; therefore, MDH may be better positioned to conduct this research.

Data Practices Requests

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	Under the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act, members of the public may make requests to state agencies for access to government data. The Act requires state agencies to respond to certain data requests within ten business days. For other requests, state agencies must respond within a “reasonable” timeframe.
Original Evaluation Questions	How long has it taken for state agencies to respond to data practices requests? To what extent has this timeframe complied with applicable requirements?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Unclear</i>	The total amount state agencies spend annually on responding to data requests is unclear. Total spending likely varies from year to year, depending on the volume and complexity of data requests.
State Control <i>High</i>	Minnesota law establishes requirements for state agencies’ responses to data practices requests.
Impact <i>Medium-Low</i>	Timely responses to data requests support government transparency and accountability. Delays in responses may adversely affect requesters. According to the Department of Administration’s Data Practices Office, requesters have limited options for enforcement if they believe an agency is not complying with the law.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	In its Fiscal Year 2023 report, the Department of Administration’s Data Practices Office noted that government entities reported receiving an increased number of requests and requests for higher volumes of data, leading to longer response times. At the same time, the report claims that a lack of proper policies and procedures outlining how to respond appropriately to data requests is a longstanding issue among some government entities.
Feasibility <i>Medium-Low</i>	The extent to which state agencies collect data on data request response times is unclear. Agencies are not required to collect these data, so any data would likely be inconsistent and difficult to compare across agencies. Evaluating response times across all state agencies would likely not be feasible, so we would need to focus on a select number of agencies.
Balance <i>High</i>	In 2017 and 2023, OLA conducted special reviews that addressed aspects of data access and data practices compliance among select state entities.
Discussion <i>Would provide limited information</i>	OLA would likely have to limit the number of agencies included in the evaluation. Even so, data may not be available. Further, state law does not establish clear standards against which OLA could evaluate the timeliness of state agency responses to data requests, outside of limited cases.

Department of Corrections

Complaint and Investigation Process

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Department of Corrections (DOC) designates different entities to investigate complaints about misconduct of personnel, based on the severity of the allegations. The Office of Special Investigations (OSI) handles allegations of serious misconduct by department staff. Review committees at the facility and agency level conduct investigations into less serious allegations of employee misconduct.
Original Evaluation Questions	To what extent does DOC adequately investigate complaints and allegations from DOC staff and inmates about the management of DOC facilities? To what extent do DOC's Office of Professional Accountability and Office of Special Investigations fulfill their policy mandates? To what extent do they follow appropriate policies and procedures?
Revised Questions	To what extent does DOC adequately investigate complaints and allegations from staff and inmates about DOC personnel? To what extent does DOC follow appropriate policies and procedures in their investigations?
State Resources <i>Low</i>	In Fiscal Year 2023, DOC spent about \$7.5 million on all OSI activities, only a portion of which are focused on investigating allegations of misconduct. The Office of Professional Accountability, which preceded the facility and agency review committees, spent just under \$900,000 in Fiscal Year 2023.
State Control <i>High</i>	Statutes give DOC supervision authority over all state facilities with respect to their management, condition, and treatment of incarcerated individuals. DOC is also responsible for ensuring a safe workplace for its employees.
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	As of 2023, DOC employed more than 4,200 staff and managed 11 facilities with over 8,000 incarcerated individuals. Incarcerated individuals are a vulnerable population, dependent on correctional officers for their safety.
Timeliness <i>Low</i>	DOC began using review committees to investigate less serious misconduct allegations in 2023. Prior to that, the Office of Professional Accountability, established in 2020, had investigated these types of allegations. These recent changes may negatively impact our ability to accurately evaluate current practices.
Feasibility <i>Medium-Low</i>	OLA could conduct this evaluation using traditional research methods, although OLA may need to focus on certain types of complaints, such as those that allege more or less serious misconduct. In addition, data on allegations and investigations may be limited.
Balance <i>Medium</i>	OLA's 2020 report, <i>Safety in State Correctional Facilities</i> , touched on information relevant to this topic and reviewed the work of OSI.
Discussion <i>Important, potential timing issues</i>	Proper investigation of misconduct complaints is an important topic worthy of attention. However, given the recent establishment of review committees and OLA's 2020 report, the timing of this project is not optimal.

Department of Employment and Economic Development Grants Management

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) administers dozens of grant programs focused on business growth, workforce development, international trade, and community development.
Original Evaluation Questions	How well has DEED managed state-funded grants? To what extent has DEED complied with requirements related to state-funded grants? To what extent has DEED documented that grant-funded services have been provided?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>High</i>	In Fiscal Year 2023, DEED received more than \$130 million in state funding to administer dozens of grant programs.
State Control <i>Medium-High</i>	State law typically establishes state-funded grants' purposes, and state agencies, including DEED, must follow state policies when administering their grant programs. However, some of the grants DEED administers are all or partially funded by the federal government, and must therefore be administered in compliance with federal requirements.
Impact <i>Medium</i>	Tens of thousands of Minnesotans receive services from DEED's workforce or business development grants, or live in communities that receive infrastructure improvements funded through DEED's grant programs.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	Grant oversight and administration are often of interest to legislators and the public, but there does not appear to be a pressing reason to review DEED's grants management at this time.
Feasibility <i>Medium-Low</i>	DEED manages many grant programs. OLA could evaluate DEED's management of a select number of these grant programs using standard evaluation techniques, but it would not be feasible to evaluate DEED's management of all grant programs.
Balance <i>Low</i>	Last year, OLA issued two program evaluations that reviewed agency grants management: <i>Oversight of State-Funded Grants to Nonprofit Organizations</i> , and <i>State Programs That Support Minnesotans on the Basis of Racial, Ethnic, or American Indian Identity</i> , the latter looked specifically at aspects of DEED's grants management. Another related evaluation, <i>Grant Award Processes</i> , will be released in spring 2024.
Discussion <i>Too broad</i>	This evaluation could provide in-depth information on DEED's grants management for a select number of grant programs. OLA would need guidance from legislators to determine which specific grant programs to evaluate.

Department of Natural Resources Land Acquisition

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

<p>Program Overview</p>	<p>The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) purchases land and conservation easements to protect, conserve, improve, consolidate, and expand recreational and natural resource opportunities throughout the state. DNR’s Lands and Minerals Division coordinates the acquisition process in cooperation with various other DNR divisions (such as Fish and Wildlife, Parks and Trails, Forestry, and Ecological and Water Resources).</p>
<p>Original Evaluation Questions</p>	<p>To what extent has DNR followed legal requirements and applicable procedures when acquiring land? To what extent has DNR conducted proper appraisals for land? To what extent has DNR accurately reported on state-owned lands under its jurisdiction? How well has DNR managed state-owned lands?</p>
<p>Revised Questions</p>	<p>How well has DNR managed the acquisition of state-owned lands? To what extent has DNR followed legal requirements and applicable procedures? How accurately has DNR reported on land acquisitions?</p>
<p>State Resources <i>Unclear</i></p>	<p>The 2023 Legislature appropriated more than \$150 million combined from the Outdoor Heritage Fund, the Parks and Trails Fund, and the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund to DNR in Fiscal Year 2024 for land acquisition projects, improvement, and management. It is unclear what portion of this sum was dedicated to land acquisition.</p>
<p>State Control <i>Medium-High</i></p>	<p>The Minnesota Legislature established the Land Acquisition Account in 1984 for the acquisition of natural resources lands and interests in land. State law requires DNR to consult with Minnesota tribal governments on matters that have tribal implications.</p>
<p>Impact <i>Medium</i></p>	<p>DNR acquires land to provide recreational and natural resources opportunities at a variety of locations such as state parks and wildlife management areas. While DNR’s land acquisitions benefit the public, they generally do not have a critical impact on the everyday lives of Minnesotans.</p>
<p>Timeliness <i>Medium</i></p>	<p>This topic does not seem urgent given that DNR’s statewide land portfolio has changed by less than one-tenth of a percent over the past five years.</p>
<p>Feasibility <i>Medium-High</i></p>	<p>OLA could complete this evaluation using traditional evaluation methods if it narrows the scope to focus on land acquisition. It is not feasible to review the entirety of DNR’s land management activities.</p>
<p>Balance <i>Medium-High</i></p>	<p>OLA is currently conducting a special review of DNR’s oversight of wildlife management areas. Prior to this special review, OLA last conducted an evaluation of DNR in 2016.</p>
<p>Discussion <i>Potentially valuable</i></p>	<p>DNR’s land portfolio has remained virtually unchanged over the past five years, but it is still important that DNR manage land acquisitions effectively. This evaluation would give OLA an opportunity to follow up on certain recommendations from its 2010 report.</p>

Guardian ad Litem Board

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	<p>When a child becomes involved in certain court cases, such as those involving neglect or custody, the court may appoint a guardian ad litem (GAL) to advocate for the child’s best interests. GALs are tasked with ensuring that the child is safe; receives appropriate services; and has their health, educational, and cultural needs met throughout their participation in child protection or family court proceedings. The GAL Board, established within the Judicial Branch, oversees and administers the statewide GAL program.</p>
Original Evaluation Questions	<p>Does the Guardian ad Litem Board have and follow an appropriate policy for responding to requests from the public? How sufficient is the information the board provides on its website? To what extent has the board implemented recommendations from OLA’s 2018 evaluation?</p>
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Medium-Low</i>	<p>The Legislature appropriated \$24.4 million for GAL Board operations for Fiscal Year 2024, primarily for compensation for the approximately 230 full-time-equivalent staff.</p>
State Control <i>Medium-High</i>	<p>Federal law requires the appointment of a GAL in every case involving a victim of child abuse or neglect that results in a judicial proceeding, with few guidelines for GAL activities. State law expands on federal law by broadening the types of cases to which a GAL may be appointed and provides more specific guidelines for GALs’ duties.</p>
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	<p>The GAL program served roughly 13,000 children in Fiscal Year 2022. The program represents children in vulnerable situations that can have a deep and lasting impact on their lives.</p>
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	<p>The program has recently gone through some changes, with the number of volunteer GALs decreasing and professional GALs increasing. This change has concerned some individuals. At the same time, there has not been widespread concern reported to make this a particularly timely topic.</p>
Feasibility <i>High</i>	<p>We could complete this review using standard evaluation techniques, such as data analysis, interviews, and document reviews.</p>
Balance <i>Low</i>	<p>OLA completed a special review focused on the Guardian ad Litem Board’s data access rules in 2023 and a program evaluation in 2018.</p>
Discussion <i>Questions largely answered</i>	<p>OLA’s recent special review focused specifically on concerns related to the GAL Board’s process for responding to public requests for information, and updates to our 2018 evaluation noted that the program had implemented several recommendations from that report. While we could look at new issues that have arisen and review the current state of the program, there is no pressing need.</p>

Guardianship of Adults

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	<p>Guardians are appointed by courts to make personal decisions—such as those related to medical care, living arrangements, and education—for adults who lack the capacity to make or communicate decisions about their needs. Individuals subject to guardianship may also have a conservator, who is appointed to make financial, rather than personal, decisions for individuals. Guardians must submit reports at least annually on individuals’ well-being to the courts. Interested persons with complaints about guardians may submit those complaints to the Judicial Branch for review.</p>
Original Evaluation Questions	<p>To what extent do appropriate minimum qualifications, screening procedures, resources, communicated standards of care, and training requirements exist for guardians? To what extent are the procedures for processing and responding to complaints about guardians transparent, comprehensive, and consistently applied? To what extent are guardian activities subject to effective and appropriate oversight on behalf of the adult under guardianship?</p>
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Unclear</i>	<p>The Judicial Branch provides online training and a manual for guardians and conducts complaint investigations about guardians. Courts are responsible for appointing guardians and receiving guardian reports, among other duties. It is unclear how much of the Judicial Branch’s funding is dedicated to these activities.</p>
State Control <i>High</i>	<p>State law governs guardianship. Minnesota statutes establish procedures for appointing guardians, the rights of persons subject to guardianship, and the responsibilities of guardians.</p>
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	<p>The Judicial Branch recorded about 2,800 guardianship/conservatorship cases in Fiscal Year 2023. Because guardians make decisions integral to the lives of persons under guardianship, they have a profound impact on those persons’ day-to-day experiences.</p>
Timeliness <i>Medium-High</i>	<p>The Legislature made several changes to state guardianship laws in 2020. Additionally, the complaint process was established at the beginning of Fiscal Year 2023. While these changes are still fairly new, it may be a good time to look at their initial impact.</p>
Feasibility <i>Medium</i>	<p>OLA could complete this evaluation using standard evaluation techniques, but we would likely need to focus some research activities on a sample of courts.</p>
Balance <i>High</i>	<p>OLA has never evaluated adult guardianship.</p>
Discussion <i>Good topic</i>	<p>Minnesota’s laws on guardianship for adults have existed for decades without a formal review by OLA. It may be a good time to evaluate the state’s approach to guardianship for some of its most vulnerable members.</p>

Impact of Economic Concentration on Small Businesses

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	Small businesses are an important part of Minnesota’s economy, with 86 percent of the state’s roughly 121,000 firms employing fewer than 20 employees. Multiple agencies have responsibilities related to small businesses or economic concentration. For example, the Department of Employment and Economic Development’s (DEED’s) Small Business Assistance Office provides consulting for small businesses, and the Attorney General’s Office (AGO) may investigate potentially anticompetitive or unfair practices.
Original Evaluation Questions	What impact has consolidation of banking services had on the availability of loans for small businesses and entrepreneurs? To what extent has the number of independent small businesses such as grocers, physicians, pharmacies, and hardware stores decreased in Minnesota? What share of spending on economic development programs has gone to small firms? What impact, if any, does a decrease in small businesses have on local economies? To what extent are Minnesota’s antitrust and trade practices laws an effective deterrent to economic consolidation, and to what degree has state government enforced those laws?
Revised Questions	To what extent has the number of small businesses changed in Minnesota in recent years? What impact do changes in the concentration of small businesses have on local economies? How useful have small business found DEED’s Small Business Assistance Office? To what extent do Minnesota’s antitrust and trade practices laws effectively deter economic consolidation, and to what degree has the AGO enforced those laws?
State Resources <i>Unclear</i>	Multiple entities in Minnesota are involved in supporting small businesses and competitive practices. Relevant state resources depend on the ultimate scope of the project. The AGO, for example, has 2.5 full-time-equivalent staff dedicated to investigating complaints of anticompetitive practices.
State Control <i>Low</i>	The federal Small Business Administration, not the state of Minnesota, is responsible for administering services, such as loan guarantees, that support small businesses. Certain anticompetitive practices are prohibited by federal law, although Minnesota has established additional requirements.
Impact <i>Medium</i>	Insufficient market competition can put small businesses at a competitive disadvantage and increase the cost of goods and services for consumers.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	The COVID-19 pandemic and related labor market and inflation issues were challenging for many small businesses. Market competition is of perennial interest.
Feasibility <i>Low</i>	Due to data limitations and resource constraints, at least some of the proposed questions may not be answerable through a program evaluation.
Balance <i>Low</i>	OLA has evaluated and audited DEED numerous times in recent years; it completed a performance audit of AGO in 2023.
Discussion <i>Unlikely to provide definitive answers</i>	This topic is extremely broad and does not focus on a state program or department. It would need significant scoping to be a feasible evaluation. OLA could potentially focus either on services provided to small businesses by an agency, such as DEED, or on the AGO’s efforts to investigate anticompetitive behavior. But, other agencies may be better equipped to answer questions that do not require OLA’s expertise. For example, in 2016, DEED analyzed the concentration of grocery stores.

Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	Agricultural runoff can harm lakes, rivers, streams, and groundwater. The Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (WQCP) is a voluntary program that provides incentives to agricultural landowners to implement conservation practices that protect water quality. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) partners with other agencies and local governments to certify program participants and support their implementation of techniques tailored to address their farms' unique water-quality risks.
Original Evaluation Questions	How well has MDA managed WQCP? How long does certification take? To what extent has MDA measured water quality improvements as a result of the program? To what extent has water quality improved? To what extent has MDA established and achieved sustainability and environmental outcomes for WQCP?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Low</i>	Since its inception, WQCP's annual appropriation (from the state's Clean Water Fund) has increased from \$1.5 million for Fiscal Year 2014 to \$3.5 million for Fiscal Years 2024. MDA directs most of this funding to local government partners that provide technical support to agricultural landowners who are certified or seeking certification. Minnesota has also secured a \$9 million federal match through Fiscal Year 2025, all of which supports landowners seeking certification.
State Control <i>High</i>	WQCP is established in state law, and MDA developed the process for assessing an agricultural producer's water quality risks. MDA also approves the local government partners and other individuals who work directly with landowners seeking certification.
Impact <i>Medium</i>	Agricultural runoff can threaten water quality throughout the state. However, as of late 2022, fewer than 1,300 of Minnesota's 67,000 farms were certified through WQCP.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	While Minnesota's water quality is of perennial interest to legislators and the public, there is no urgent reason to evaluate WQCP this year.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	OLA could evaluate WQCP using standard evaluation techniques, including data analysis, document reviews, interviews, and surveys.
Balance <i>Medium-High</i>	OLA has never evaluated WQCP. OLA's most recent evaluation related to MDA or water quality was <i>Pesticide Regulation</i> , released in 2020.
Discussion <i>Feasible and potentially useful</i>	Since MDA began administering WQCP in 2014, enrollment and interest has continued to expand. MDA reports that the program has been successful in terms of water quality outcomes and the financial health of the participants. An OLA evaluation could help determine the value of the program and provide suggestions for the future.

Minnesota Department of Health: Human Resources

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Human Resources Management Division manages employee relations, administers benefits and payroll, and provides other services to MDH employees. MDH employees with complaints about personnel issues may report them internally, including to human resources staff, their supervisors, or agency leadership.
Original Evaluation Questions	To what extent are MDH processes for investigating and addressing personnel issues fair and comprehensive? How well does MDH Human Resources protect employees from retaliation for submitting human resources-related complaints and notifying supervisors of noncompliance with MDH policy and state law?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Low</i>	The Human Resources Management Division is part of MDH’s Health Operations Bureau, which had expenditures of about \$59 million in Fiscal Year 2023. The amount MDH spent on human resources is unclear, but it is likely a small fraction of the bureau’s total budget.
State Control <i>High</i>	MDH must comply with administrative, human resources, and personnel requirements for state agencies established by law and state policy. For example, MDH must comply with state laws that protect whistleblowers.
Impact <i>Low</i>	MDH’s Human Resources Management Division provides human resource services to about 1,600 MDH employees located across the state.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	There is no compelling reason to review or not to review MDH’s Human Resources Management Division at this time.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	OLA could complete this evaluation using standard evaluation methods, such as surveys, document reviews, and interviews.
Balance <i>Medium-High</i>	OLA has not directly evaluated MDH’s Human Resources Management Division. OLA last evaluated a division within MDH in our 2018 report, <i>Office of Health Facility Complaints</i> .
Discussion <i>Feasible, not urgent</i>	This evaluation could provide useful information about MDH’s Human Resources and the experiences of MDH employees. However, there does not seem to be a pressing need for this information at this time. To the extent that employees have specific concerns or complaints about MDH Human Resources, they can report them directly to OLA or Minnesota Management and Budget for review.

Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Faculty Pay Processing

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (Minnesota State) is a system of 33 universities, technical colleges and community colleges located on 54 campuses across the state. As of 2023, the system employed roughly 14,000 faculty and staff. Each semester, individual campuses submit approved faculty course assignments to the central system office, which processes faculty payroll and benefits.
Original Evaluation Questions	What policies and procedures does Minnesota State have in place to ensure the timely approval of courses and corresponding faculty assignments and payroll? To what extent has it adhered to these policies and procedures? To what extent has Minnesota State taken appropriate steps to ensure accuracy in its payroll system?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>High</i>	A large portion of Minnesota State’s revenues come from state appropriations. In Fiscal Year 2023, appropriations accounted for about \$807.5 million, or 39 percent, of the system’s \$2.1 billion in total revenues. That year, faculty and staff salaries and benefits made up the majority of the system’s spending, at 64 percent, or nearly \$1.3 billion.
State Control <i>High</i>	Minnesota State is governed by a board of trustees, whose members are appointed by the governor. The board, in turn, appoints a chancellor to execute its powers. Under state law, the board’s duties include streamlining services offered through its central system office to provide efficient and effective services to the individual institutions.
Impact <i>Medium</i>	As of 2023, Minnesota State employed roughly 14,000 faculty and staff. Payroll delays and errors can have a significant impact on employees and their families.
Timeliness <i>Medium-High</i>	Concerns have been raised recently about coordination issues between the central system office and individual campuses, resulting in errors related to payroll and benefit eligibility.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	OLA could conduct this review using standard research methods, either as a program evaluation or a financial audit, or a combination of the two.
Balance <i>High</i>	OLA has not conducted a program evaluation of Minnesota State since its 2010 report, <i>MnSCU System Office</i> , or a financial audit since its 2016 report, <i>Employee Separation Payments</i> .
Discussion <i>Potentially better for financial audit</i>	OLA is well positioned to provide an independent perspective on coordination issues that may exist between the central system office and individual campuses. However, given the heavy focus on pay-related concerns, this topic may be better considered for a financial audit.

Oversight of Family Child Care Providers

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The term “family child care” generally refers to daycare services that take place in a provider’s home. The Department of Human Services (DHS) Licensing Division coordinates with county governments to regulate family child care providers in Minnesota. Statutes require DHS to communicate legislative changes to family child care providers and to oversee the work of county governments. County governments must inspect family child care facilities and assess their compliance with legal requirements.
Original Evaluation Questions	To what extent are there differences in the requirements or oversight of in-home and commercial daycare facilities? How well has DHS educated family child care providers on changes to requirements? To what extent has DHS collaborated with local entities to enhance family child care services? What data does DHS track regarding safety incidents at in-home daycare facilities? To what extent has DHS identified patterns in safety incident data?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Low</i>	The total state cost of regulating family child care providers is unclear, but likely minimal. As of summer 2023, DHS had 10 staff responsible for regulating family child care providers, while county governments had more than 200 staff with that responsibility.
State Control <i>High</i>	The requirements that family child care providers must adhere to are established in state law. DHS regulates family child care providers through licensure and can issue licensing sanctions if providers fail to comply with legal requirements.
Impact <i>High</i>	Family child care providers are responsible for the health and safety of children in their care. As of June 2023, there were about 5,800 family child care providers in Minnesota, with capacity to care for more than 68,000 children. Effective oversight of these providers is essential for promptly identifying and addressing safety incidents.
Timeliness <i>Low</i>	The DHS Licensing Division is currently being restructured, and state oversight of family child care providers will soon move to a new agency.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	OLA could conduct this evaluation using standard evaluation methods, including interviews and document reviews. During a recent evaluation, OLA learned that DHS holds detailed data on inspections of family child care providers.
Balance <i>Low</i>	OLA released a similar evaluation, <i>Department of Human Services Licensing Division: Support to Counties</i> , in 2024, though this evaluation did not specifically assess DHS’s regulation of family child care providers.
Discussion <i>Poor timing</i>	OLA’s 2024 evaluation of the DHS Licensing Division focused heavily on the work of the same ten DHS staff who oversee family child care providers. That, combined with the fact that family child care oversight will soon move to a different state agency, make this a poor time for an evaluation.

Oversight of Minnesota Veterans Homes

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) administers Minnesota Veterans Homes. These homes provide residential care for veterans or qualifying spouses who require either skilled nursing care or “domiciliary care” (independent living with other types of support, such as mental health services). In early 2024, MDVA opened three new homes, bringing the total to eight Minnesota Veterans Homes around the state.
Original Evaluation Questions	How well does MDVA oversee Veterans Homes? To what extent have residents in Minnesota Veterans Homes received proper and necessary care? To what extent have MDVA leaders ensured a safe and healthy workplace for Veterans Homes administrators and staff?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Medium</i>	The Legislature has recently increased its appropriations to Minnesota Veterans Homes, from \$57 million for Fiscal Year 2020 to nearly \$100 million for Fiscal Year 2025.
State Control <i>Medium-High</i>	Many of the regulations governing Minnesota Veterans Homes—including admission criteria, quality assurance, and residents’ rights, among other things—are established in state law. Veterans homes are also subject to federal requirements for nursing homes.
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	Several hundred of the state’s nearly 300,000 veterans reside in Minnesota Veterans Homes. While the number of veterans served by the homes is small, the homes have a deep impact on the health and wellness of their residents.
Timeliness <i>High</i>	Members of the public have raised concerns about the Minnesota Veterans Homes. Some of these complaints led to a legislatively established work group focused on domiciliary care. The work group released a report in January 2024, which answered some of the questions posed above; this could allow OLA to focus on skilled nursing services. Given that MDVA has received a funding increase and has just opened three new homes, it could be a good time to evaluate Minnesota Veterans Homes.
Feasibility <i>Medium-High</i>	OLA could complete this evaluation using traditional evaluation methods. To evaluate quality of care, OLA may also need to work with the Minnesota Department of Health to access data on that department’s inspections of veterans homes.
Balance <i>High</i>	OLA has never evaluated the administration of Minnesota Veterans Homes. It has been several years since OLA conducted a financial audit of MDVA or any of the homes.
Discussion <i>Important topic</i>	Minnesota Veterans Homes provide important services and care to veterans living in Minnesota, and the recent expansion will bring those services to more parts of the state. It could be a good time for OLA to review how effectively MDVA administers Minnesota Veterans Homes.

Voter Registration

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	<p>To vote in elections, Minnesotans must meet eligibility requirements and register. Voter registration responsibilities are shared in the state; the Office of the Secretary of State (OSS) must maintain a statewide voter registration database, while county election officials must process registration applications and maintain voter records. State and county officials must follow federal and state requirements.</p>
Original Evaluation Questions	<p>To what extent has OSS complied with requirements related to election security measures to ensure only the votes of eligible voters are counted? To what extent has OSS complied with Help America Vote Act requirements? How has the number of registered and active voters changed in recent years? To what extent have changes to voter documentation requirements affected election security and participation?</p>
Revised Questions	<p>To what extent has OSS ensured that only votes of eligible voters are counted? To what extent has OSS complied with Help America Vote Act requirements? How has the number of registered and active voters changed in recent years?</p>
State Resources <i>Low</i>	<p>OSS’s total expenditures have fluctuated year-to-year, but in recent years, they have not exceeded \$23 million. It is unclear what portion of OSS’s overall expenditures are dedicated to voter registration activities.</p>
State Control <i>Medium</i>	<p>Minnesota law establishes voter registration requirements that OSS and county election officials must follow. However, OSS must also follow certain federal laws, such as the 2002 Help America Vote Act.</p>
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	<p>About 3.5 million people are registered to vote in Minnesota. Access to and confidence in the electoral process are important for voters to participate in their government.</p>
Timeliness <i>Low</i>	<p>The 2023 Legislature passed laws that made numerous changes to voter registration in Minnesota effective through 2024. It is likely too soon to evaluate the impact of these recent changes, and findings and recommendations based on prior processes may not be applicable to new ones.</p>
Feasibility <i>Medium</i>	<p>OLA could conduct this evaluation using standard research techniques, including interviews, document reviews, and data analysis. However, we would need to focus any county-based research on a sample of counties.</p>
Balance <i>Low</i>	<p>OLA’s 2018 report, <i>Voter Registration</i>, addressed topics similar to those noted above.</p>
Discussion <i>Premature</i>	<p>Election integrity and voter access are vital to a strong democracy. However, given recent changes to voter registration and OLA’s relatively recent evaluation, other topics may be more timely.</p>