



# Department of Natural Resources Land Acquisition

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) land acquisition process—though lengthy—has generally complied with land acquisition process requirements. However, the department has not reported on land acquisitions as required by law.

### Report Summary

#### Legal Compliance

Minnesota statutes contain provisions that guide DNR's land acquisition process. These requirements relate to appraisals and purchase price, among other things.

- While all land DNR acquires must generally meet the same standards, some requirements for partner-led acquisitions are not established in statutes. (pp. 17-19)
- DNR has generally complied—or required partner organizations to comply—with applicable land acquisition requirements. (p. 19)

**Recommendation ►** The Legislature should consider whether statutes should require partner organizations conveying land to the state to meet the same land acquisition standards required of DNR. (p. 27)

#### Reporting

Beyond the information that DNR provides on its website and in other public reports, Minnesota statutes require DNR to submit two reports related to separate aspects of land acquisition.

- DNR has not fully complied with either of these two legislative reporting requirements. (pp. 28-29)

**Recommendation ►** DNR should regularly produce reports identifying (1) its inventory of DNR-managed land and (2) transactions from the Land Acquisition Account, as required by law. (p. 29)

- The manner in which DNR maintains data on acquired land gives rise to questions about the accuracy and consistency of those data. (pp. 29-30)

**Recommendation ►** DNR should maintain data on landholdings and acquisitions in a manner that facilitates consistent and accurate reporting. (p. 30)

### Background

Minnesota has about 51 million acres of land within its borders. The State of Minnesota owns—and DNR manages—more than 5.6 million acres (11 percent of land in the state).

DNR acquires land to conserve natural resources, improve and expand recreational opportunities, and support sustainable economic use of natural resources. The department selects land for acquisition using its “strategic land asset management” (SLAM) framework, which consists of six goals.

While DNR acquires some land directly from landowners, it receives other land from nonprofit organizations and other entities (known as partner organizations) that receive state grant funding to purchase land and convey it to the department.

The Outdoor Heritage Fund has recently been the sole source of funding for partner-led acquisitions and a major source for DNR-led acquisitions. Since the fund was created, the role of partner organizations in the state's efforts to acquire land has expanded considerably.

## Land Selection Performance

DNR uses SLAM goals to ensure that the land it acquires contributes meaningfully to the department's land portfolio. The department has a goal that 80 percent of acquisitions meet three or more SLAM goals.

- DNR's current SLAM goals align well with the department's strategic plan and with statutes, and nearly all of DNR's acquisition projects in the period we reviewed met three or more SLAM goals. (pp. 33-34, 37)
- The stakeholders we surveyed and interviewed expressed generally favorable opinions of DNR's process for selecting land to acquire. (pp. 35-37)

## Land Acquisition Performance

The success of DNR's land acquisition depends in part on how well the department collaborates with the many stakeholders that participate in the process and how efficiently it completes the process.

- In our surveys, DNR staff and landowners reported generally positive impressions of DNR's land acquisition performance, while partner organization and county representatives had mixed views. (pp. 39-42)
- In recent years, the median DNR land acquisition took 21 months to close. (p. 43)
- Many DNR staff and partner organization representatives expressed concern with the length of the land acquisition process. (pp. 44-47)
- DNR has taken steps to improve the timeliness of partner-led acquisitions as part of its continuous improvement project. (pp. 48-50)

**Recommendation ►** To the extent that proposed solutions identified through the continuous improvement project could also apply to DNR-led acquisitions, the department should implement them to reduce the length of these acquisitions. (p. 51)

## Summary of Department Response

In a letter dated April 23, 2025, Commissioner Strommen said that DNR values OLA's "recommendations and the perspectives you gathered from others involved in land acquisition with DNR." Further, the commissioner said "We fully understand the importance of having a robust land acquisition program that appropriately balances process efficiency and timeliness with adherence to state statute and foundational principles of risk management."

The commissioner indicated that DNR intended to implement OLA's recommendations related to continuous improvement efforts and Land Acquisition Account reporting. Regarding the requirement to report to the Legislature an inventory of DNR-managed land, she said DNR has recommended repealing this language, but would work to meet the requirement if the repealer is not enacted. Regarding OLA's recommendation that DNR maintain its data in a manner that facilitates consistent and accurate reporting, the commissioner wrote that the limitations with DNR's data system "are understood and managed within DNR to avoid providing inaccurate information." She suggested that instances where OLA identified imprecisely reported data reflected DNR's efforts to "use plain language to convey accurate information at an appropriate level of detail."