



Superior National Forest

Forest Service News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Joy VanDrie, Public Affairs Staff Officer
231-878-0998 call or text
joy.vandrie@usda.gov

The Superior NF Initiates Scoping Period with Public Comment for the purchase of 80,000 acres of Minnesota School Trust Land, 3,200 acres of St. Louis County Land, and 17,000 acres of The Conservation Fund land

The purpose of the scoping period is to inform the public of the proposed action and to solicit public comments from August 6 through September 3, 2024.

Duluth, MN. August 6, 2024. The Superior National Forest (SNF) is proposing land purchases with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), St. Louis County (SLC), and The Conservation Fund (TCF). The proposed purchases are the next step after the cancellation of the School Trust Land Exchange, which was originally proposed by the DNR in 2012. The purpose of the scoping period is to inform the public of the proposed action and to solicit public comments from August 6 through September 3, 2024. The scoping package and links to comment are available at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/superior/?project=66600>.

The trust land transfer to federal ownership will resolve a decades-old land management issue that began when the areas providing access to the 80,000 acres of school trust land became a designated wilderness area under the 1964 Wilderness Act and through the passage of the 1978 Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act. The State of Minnesota withdrew its request for a land exchange, and the SNF canceled the school trust land exchange Environmental Impact Statement as documented in a Federal Register Notice dated July 12, 2024.

With the proposed acquisitions, the Federal Government would purchase approximately 80,000 acres of School Trust lands, and approximately 3,200 acres of tax-forfeit St. Louis County lands within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW); and approximately 17,000 acres of lands held by TCF outside the BWCAW, but within the proclamation boundary of the Forest. (*See Frequently Asked Questions at the end of this release.*)

“The purchase of these lands will help reduce administrative issues the State, St Louis County and the Forest Service have faced for a long time,” says Tom Hall, Forest Supervisor, SNF, “and the purchase of TCF lands will offer approximately 17,000 new acres of public land within the Superior National Forest.”

The School Trust and SLC lands acquired inside the BWCAW would be managed as wilderness under the BWCAW Act, and the TCF lands acquired inside the Forest boundary would be managed for multi-use purposes in accordance with the Forest Plan. These lands would be open to the public for recreational use. Approximately \$50 million in Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) funding is currently available for the Forest Service’s proposed purchase.

The SNF is initiating a 30-day scoping comment period to gather public input on these proposed land purchases. The Project Scoping Package is available under the school trust lands, St. Louis County and TCF Purchase webpage

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/superior/?project=66600>. The Scoping Package explains the project's purpose and describes the proposed actions in further detail.

Scoping informs interested and affected parties of the proposed action and solicits public comments. The SNF anticipates analyzing the comments and environmental effects of the proposed project and making a decision using a categorical exclusion under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

- **Public Comment** - the public is invited to make site-specific comments on the proposed purchases of the school trust lands and TCF land **now through September 3, 2024**. The Project Scoping Package describes the analysis process for these purchases and outlines the process for submitting comments.
- **Open Houses** – the public is invited to provide an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the project. An **in-person open house** will be on **August 28** - from 4:30 – 7 p.m. at the SNF Supervisor's Office (8901 Grand Ave. Pl, Duluth, MN 55808). A **virtual open house** will be held on **August 29** from 4:00-6:00 p.m. The link is also available in the Scoping Package.
- **The Scoping Package** including proposed action maps, lands lists, etc. are available electronically on the SNF website under the [Forests Project Page](#) - School Trust Lands, St. Louis County & TCF [Purchase Project webpage](#). Paper copies of the scoping documents are available upon request. For more information, please contact Trevor Peck, Special Projects Manager, at trevor.peck@usda.gov, (801) 823-5138 or Barbara Thompson, Lands Program Manager, at barbara.thompson@usda.gov, (218) 365-7618.

The process and next steps for the SNF:

- **Scoping for Purchase Proposal:** The SNF has published a scoping notice and package on the Forest website under the [School Trust, St. Louis Cty and TCF Purchase webpage](#) collecting public comment through September 3, 2024.
- **Final Decision(s):** After reviewing public input and analyzing the projects, final decision(s) will be documented in Decision Memo(s), anticipated in late 2024.
- **Transaction Final:** After publication of Final Decision Memo(s), there is additional related field and project work.

Informational web pages have been created to ensure the public has access to all relevant materials for this project (*Please see informational web pages for additional points of contact*):

- Superior National Forest School Trust, St Louis Cty & TCF Lands Purchase informational web page <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/superior/home/?cid=stelprd3835773>
- Superior National Forest School Trust & TCF Lands Purchase project page <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/superior/?project=66600>
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources School Trust Lands Sale web page https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/aboutdnr/school_land/school-trust-lands-projects.html
- Minnesota Office of School Trust Lands Sale web Page <https://mn.gov/school-trust-lands/projects/boundary-waters>
- The Conservation Fund Superior National Forest Lands Sale web page <https://www.conservationfund.org/projects/preserving-minnesotas-treasured-boundary-waters>

The Question & Answers below are in addition to the Q&A offered during the [July 12, 2024 FRN EIS Cancellation](#) notice:

Q. Where is the federal money coming from for the purchase?

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

A. There is \$50 million in Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) funding is currently available for the Forest Service's purchase of the State lands. The parties will work closely with the State's congressional delegation and other members of Congress on LWCF funding needs for the Forest Service's proposed purchase of School Trust, St. Louis County, and TCF lands under the new proposal. The Forest Service would purchase the state, county, and TCF lands in separate transactions, and due diligence will be initiated separately for both projects

Q. Why a purchase rather than an exchange when an exchange would have allowed for land that could be used for logging and mining and created revenue from years rather than one-time payment.

A. Even under the previous hybrid model, there was a purchase component. The Forest Service was going to purchase 53,000 acres of School Trust lands within the BWCAW. The purchase would consolidate federal ownership and incorporates tribal consultation.

The new federally owned acres would lead to an increase in various federal payments to counties, such as Secure Rural Schools (SRS), Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and Thye-Blatnik. School Trust lands acquired by the federal government will be considered in the next Thye-Blatnik appraisal beginning in 2028. Tax revenues outside of the BWCAW would not be affected.

Q. What authority does the Forest Service have to change from an exchange to a purchase? The Wilderness Act of 1964 only speaks to an exchange of State-owned land completely surrounded by a designated wilderness (like the BWCAW) for federally owned land in the same State of approximately equal value.

A. The Forest Service has broad statutory authority to purchase land, including under the Weeks Act (16 U.S.C. § 515) and the Organic Act (7 U.S.C. § 2268a). Here, the Forest Service will directly purchase Minnesota School Trust lands within the BWCAW under the Weeks Act, its primary land purchase authority in the eastern United States, authorizing the purchase of land to protect the headwaters of rivers and watersheds. The Weeks Act purchase authority does not distinguish between wilderness and non-wilderness lands and has been widely used to acquire lands throughout the eastern United States, including in wilderness. The Wilderness Act of 1964 (16 U.S.C. § 1134) provides that if adequate access to State- or privately-owned land in wilderness cannot be provided, then federal land shall be offered in exchange for those inholdings; it does not in any way preclude a purchase from taking place using other legal authorities.

Q. Has the Forest Service considered lands from Cook and Lake Counties as well?

A. The Forest Service has worked with both Cook and Lake Counties on land projects prior, see those projects here:

- Cook County 2015 - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/superior/?project=40660>
- Lake County 2010 - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/superior/?project=6514>

###

Find out more about the Superior National Forest at www.fs.usda.gov/superior and follow us on X/Twitter @SuperiorNF, on [Facebook](#) and [Flickr](#) (photo credit: Superior National Forest) #superiornf

The Superior National Forest is managed in Five (5) districts, with a Supervisor's Office:

- Supervisor's Office, Duluth: 218-626-4300
- Gunflint District Office, Grand Marais: 218-387-1750
- Kawishiwi District Office, Ely: 218-365-7600
- LaCroix District Office, Cook: 218-666-0020
- Laurentian District Office, Aurora: 218-453-8650
- Tofte District Office, Tofte: 218-663-8060

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.