

PRESS RELEASE

The Tribal Stream and Michigan Fruitbelt Collaborative Brings an Additional \$20.4M to Northwest Lower Michigan for Conservation

TRAVERSE CITY, Feb. 14, 2024 – The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians (GTB), the lead partner of the Tribal Stream and Michigan Fruitbelt Collaborative, has been selected to manage a FY 2023 Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). NRCS has awarded \$20,359,756 for this project, pending negotiation of a Programmatic Partnership Agreement. For more information about RCPP, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/rcpp-regional-conservation-partnership-program.

The Tribal Stream and Michigan Fruitbelt Collaborative is made up of the Grand Traverse Band together with Conservation Resource Alliance, Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, and Leelanau Conservancy as core partners. The partnership successfully executed an initial 5-year RCPP project beginning in 2016 with an award of approximately \$12M and received and currently implementing a renewal of \$4.4M received in 2021. The project continues to aim to preserve and restore the fragmented multi-tribal fisheries and wildlife populations as well as preserve the rural character of watersheds and wildlife corridors that face escalating development pressures. The project focuses on two main objectives: replacing restricted road culverts with passages that facilitate the movement of native aquatic organisms and purchasing conservation easements to prevent the development of agricultural and forested land for non-agricultural purposes.

The replacement of restricted road culverts to accommodate fish passage is crucial for restoring connectivity in the aquatic ecosystem. Many existing culverts are barriers to fish migration, preventing them from accessing important spawning and feeding areas. By replacing these culverts with structures (bridges or bottomless culverts) that allow fish to move freely, the project aims to improve the health and resilience of fish populations as well as road infrastructure in the region. For more information on current stream-crossing projects that partners are working on, visit www.rivercare.org.

Additionally, the project seeks to protect agricultural and forested land from being converted into non-agricultural uses. This is achieved through the purchase of conservation easements, which restrict the future development of the land. The partners seek to engage with the community, target historically underserved landowners, and foster a deeper understanding of land and water as commonalities between us all. By preserving these agricultural and forested areas, the project helps maintain the rural character of the region, protects stream health and vital groundwater supplies, promotes tourism, and supports the viability of the local farming community. If interested in land protection and conservation easements, visit www.leelanauconservancy.org/land-protection-toolkit and www.gtrlc.org/land-protection-stewardship/land-protection-overview.

The Tribal Stream and Michigan Fruitbelt Collaborative's commitment to holistic watershed restoration has garnered attention, with Joe VanderMeulen of Nature Change creating a short documentary film titled "Restoring Aquatic Ecosystems in Northwest Lower Michigan" about their collaborative efforts. The film, available for free on the Nature Change website (www.naturechange.org), showcases the significant impact of the Tribal Stream and Michigan Fruitbelt Collaborative.

Watersheds and streams are the blood and veins of earth and protecting them is of utmost importance to GTB. The Grand Traverse Band looks forward to working closely with Partners and NRCS to ensure the success of this project.

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