



## 2017 Legislation & Budget Request Form

**Date:** March 23, 2016

**Staff Person:** Bryce Maxell, Program Coordinator, Montana Natural Heritage Program

**Proposal Name:** Montana Natural Heritage Program Core Funding Increase

### **Brief description of proposal:**

The Montana Natural Heritage Program (MTNHP) was created by the Montana legislature in 1983 to be "a program of information acquisition, storage, and retrieval for data relating to the flora, fauna, and biological community types of Montana." (MCA 90-15-102). The MTNHP is the primary source for animal, plant, wetland, and land cover information used in environmental reviews conducted by local, state, federal, and tribal governments and private consulting firms. Having this information centralized and made readily available on MTNHP websites such as the Montana Field Guide, Species Snapshot, and Map Viewer provides our user communities with a common set of information, allows environmental and species status reviews to proceed quickly, and saves untold dollars to the private and public sectors. The enabling legislation for MTNHP (MCA 90-15) provides the Montana State Library (MSL) with the option to run the program directly or contract for its operation and make available state resources and facilities as part of the contract for services. Since 2006, MTNHP has been operated by the University of Montana (UM) through a renewable 2-year contract with MSL. Since FY08, the MSL contract has provided approximately \$440,000 per year for the core services of the program; additional funding required to support full FTEs of core positions has come from state, federal, tribal, and private sector entities. Because MTNHP is operated as a contract with UM, the program has received no increase in core funding from FY08 to FY17 to cover inflation, rising health care costs, mandated but unfunded salary increases, and the increases in the costs of Biotics software required to meet our statutory to manage information in a compatible manner with Heritage Programs in other states (MCA 90-15-302). This funding situation has effectively reduced the buying power of core funding by at least \$100,000 over this 9-year period. In addition, in order to meet increasing demands for internet delivery of services, it was necessary for MTNHP to create a full-time web programmer position. As a result, core funding for the Botany, Ecology, and Zoology Program Managers' positions has fallen from over 50% in FY08 to 30% in FY16. This reduction in core funds has required science staff to spend time and effort raising project funds to support their positions and has diverted their time and effort away from core tasks to completing project deliverables. Less time for core tasks has resulted in reductions in currency and accuracy of species and community information, outdated evaluations and updates of species conservation status ranks, reductions in maintenance and updates of accounts on the Montana Field Guide, loss of the Aquatic Ecology program component, reduced ability to answer data requests at the desired level, and reduced ability to review and process observation data and make it available for environmental reviews. The stress of inadequate funding has also had demonstrable adverse impacts on staff morale, retention, and recruitment.

**This EPP request would fund a \$100,000 annual increase the core funding contract to increase the Botany, Ecology, and Zoology Program Managers' positions from 0.3 to 0.65 FTE and to cover the increased costs of the Biotics software to keep Species Occurrence data compatible with Heritage Programs in other states.**

### **How will the proposal positively impact the communities we serve?**

Communities served by MTNHP include federal, state, local, and tribal government, private businesses, non-profit organizations, K-12 and higher education, and the general public. The core funding the program receives is critical to keep MTNHP information current, accurate, and complete, to ensure web applications effectively deliver information, and that expert staff are available for consultation. Providing our patrons with up-to-date and accurate information and feedback from science staff on appropriate uses of the data allows them to avoid conflicts and delays in environmental review processes and reduce or eliminate unnecessary impacts to plant and animal species. Maintaining complete and accurate databases and up-to-date conservation status ranks for species allows staff to focus efforts on species that are truly rare rather than just poorly documented. For example, fourteen plant species were dropped as candidates for Federal listing under the Endangered Species Act when data showed they were more widespread than previously thought and MTNHP data were widely used to defend against listing several animal species recently proposed for Federal listing. Likewise, maintaining accurate data on listed species is essential to determine when they can be de-listed. Other

examples of the importance of maintaining complete and accurate information with adequate core funding include: weed management consultants use of the data to avoid unnecessary impacts to Species of Concern when spraying for weeds; the wood products industries use of the data in local forest management plans to meet requirements under the Sustainable Forestry Initiative audit program; private consultants, county planning boards, and surveying offices use of the data while planning a variety of infrastructure development projects; use of the data by the BLM and USFS to develop resource management and forest management plans; and use of the data by federal land management planners to prepare environmental assessments for timber sales, grazing leases, and oil and gas leases.

**How does this proposal support MSL's [long range plan](#) and/or other planning documents such as the Library Development Study Task Force recommendations?**

Adequate funding of MTNHP's core science positions and database software requirements is essential to achieving the Content, Access, Training, Consultation and Leadership, Collaboration, and Sustainable Success goals of MSL's long range plan. As Montana's primary source for information on Montana's plants, animals, and biological communities, MTNHP science staff need appropriate funding to keep information content current and accurate and make it easily accessible to libraries, agencies, partners, and patrons via web interfaces and applications. Staff also need adequate funding to respond to patron requests, provide trainings to patrons and partners on information availability and appropriate uses, and collaborate with partners on data centralization and development of additional information sources and means of access. Finally, in order for MTNHP to ensure sustainable success, adequate funding is needed to retain and recruit highly skilled staff.

**FTE Required?** ..... Yes No

**Cost of proposal and proposed source of funding:**

\$100,000 per fiscal year State General Fund

**Please list other entities involved in developing the proposal:**

The MTNHP Partners Committee (USFS, BLM, NRCS, DNRC, DEQ, USFWS, MALT, TNC, FWP, MDT, MT Audubon, USGS, Ducks Unlimited, and UM) provided invaluable input during the 2013, 2014, and 2015 annual MTNHP Partners meetings. Many of these organizations also provided input and comment during numerous follow-up personal meetings and phone conversations.

**Please identify interested constituencies or persons who may be called upon to testify in support of this proposal:**

Testimony on the value of MTNHP:

- Weyerhaeuser
- Montana Wood Products Association
- Montana Contractors Association
- Pyramid Lumber
- Ranch Resources
- Montana Association of Land Trusts
- University of Montana
- Northwest Energy Corporation
- The Nature Conservancy
- Celestine Duncan
- F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Co

Letters of support on the value of the MTNHP:

- Regional Forester, US Forest Service Region 1, Missoula, MT
- State Director, US Bureau of Land Management, Montana/Dakotas Office, Billings, MT
- Field Supervisor, US Fish and Wildlife Ecological Services Field Office, Helena, MT
- State Conservationist, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Bozeman, MT

Others potentially willing to provide letters of support or testimony on the value of MTNHP:

- Montana Coal Council
- Montana Association of Conservation Districts
- Montana Association of Planners
- Montana Petroleum Association

**Other relevant information to consider when evaluating this proposal:**

Even prior to FY08 the Botany, Ecology, and Zoology Program Manager positions were not fully funded for core work under the biennial MSL core contract. This request does not address partial funding of other essential core positions or enable the restoration of the Aquatic Ecologist position. Furthermore, it does not address the ongoing issue that inflation, rising health care costs, and mandated but unfunded salary increases are not automatically included in the core contract with MSL.