



Climate and Natural Systems Agency-Council Workgroup Update

Community Development Committee



April 20, 2026

Climate and Natural Systems Workgroup



Purpose and Background

- Agency-Council workgroup that convenes natural resource managers to identify regional coordination opportunities for climate resilience and natural systems restoration and protection.
 - Where can the Council support these efforts in our local agencies?
- Created during Imagine 2050 planning process to develop the Natural Systems and Climate Resilience policies in the Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan.
 - Agencies expressed interest in continuing workgroup after policy planning process. Participants saw value in having a space for natural systems coordination and to implement work plan items.

Climate and Natural Systems Workgroup

Imagine 2050 and Policy Plan Connections

Related Imagine 2050 Regional Goals

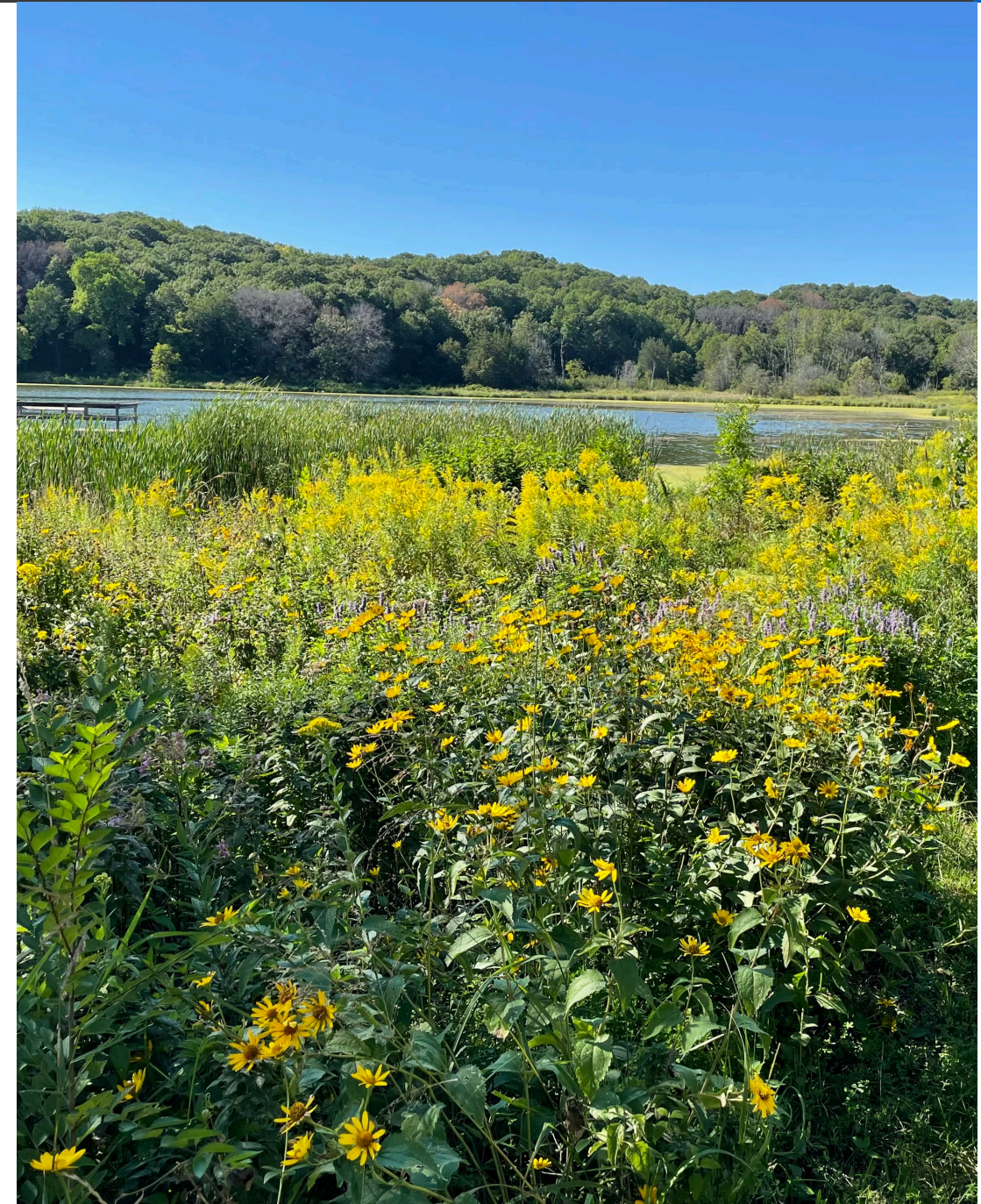
- We lead on addressing climate change
- We protect and restore natural systems

Related 2050 Regional Parks and Trails Policy Plan Objectives

- Protect and restore: Protect and restore natural systems to safeguard the well-being of all living things.
- Adapt and mitigate: Increase the region's resilience to climate change through land stewardship practices that mitigate greenhouse gases and adapt to future climates.

Related 2050 Policy Plan Policies

- Natural Systems: Identify lands with high-quality natural features and/or with high restoration potential... and put these lands in a protected status so that they will be available for recreational uses and preservation purposes in perpetuity.
- Climate Resilience: Adapt and enhance the Regional Parks and Trails System to promote resilience to climate change, including the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions.



Climate and Natural Systems Workgroup



Policy Plan Workplan Connections

- Explore establishment of a Special Features – Open Space/Natural Systems subclassification.
- Reconvene Climate and Natural Systems Workgroup to discuss implementation steps for climate resilience policy and actions.
- Develop an inventory of and guidelines for harvestable fruits, mushrooms, and other plants.
- Develop learning opportunities for implementing agencies to explore indigenous land management practices and other related topics.

2026 Workgroup Priorities

- Workgroup topics gathered from 2050 policy plan and agency feedback.

Future Priorities

- Open Space Classification exploration
- Identify opportunities for regional research projects related to Natural Systems and Climate Resilience
- Coordinate and plan learning opportunities for agencies
- Define what implementation of climate policy looks like



Open Space Classification Exploration



Background and Context

- Idea for classification suggested during policy plan development stage.
 - Agencies mentioned that the best strategy to protect natural systems and build resilience was by acquiring more land for parks and natural systems.
 - Acquiring land primarily for conservation outside of a park or trail currently isn't flexible.
 - Park Reserves have a minimum acreage requirement of 1,000 acres, doesn't seem possible to find large chunks of land in Twin Cities.
- Open Space classification would primarily focus on protecting and connecting regionally significant natural areas instead of having a recreation focus.
- Classification exploration is currently in the process of conducting an environmental scan to understand existing efforts in the region.

Open Space Classification Environmental Scan

March Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission Feedback

- How do we determine what open space is regional in nature?
- Similar natural/conservation areas at state level, in some metro counties.
- Limited funding environment.
- Provide some level of public access. Consider low impact development.
- Could we reduce the acreage requirement for a park reserve? Keep the 80/20 ratio but at a smaller scale.
- Consider value to communities. What is the intent? Should be easy to understand by the public.
- A new subclassification may demand some reclassification of existing units.



Open Space Classification Environmental Scan



Agency Engagement

- Engaged with regional park implementing agencies, MNDNR, conservation organizations, and conservation districts to understand existing land conservation efforts

General Themes

- Some gaps present in region's open space network
- Funding and capacity are a constraint and a concern
- Site location and context is important
- Regional coordination and prioritization could be another way the Council supports natural systems work
- Multiple perspectives on how this classification could function
 - Function depends on the goals and intent of the classification

Open Space Classification Exploration

Potential Concept and Purpose

- **Purpose:** Create a network of ecologically valuable lands that contribute to habitat, biodiversity, water resource protection, and landscape resilience at a regional scale, regardless of parcel size, and supported by flexible protection tools and long-term stewardship funding.
- **Uses:** Ecosystem services (water protection and recharge, habitat connectivity, buffers), light recreation and crowdsourced science opportunities.
- **Functions**
 - Similar to a park reserve, but without the larger acreage requirements.
 - Could take the form of wildlife corridors connecting fragmented units or added buffers around existing parks and trails.
 - Opportunities to partner with local agencies and organizations to create patchwork of natural areas.



Open Space Classification Process



Proposed Timeline and Steps

Month	Milestones
2026	
March – April	Environmental Scan
May	Create Classification Recommendation
May – September*	Draft and Revise Classification Language
October – December*	Finalize Language in a minor policy plan amendment and Engage with Agencies and Council Committees
2027	
January – *	System Additions Process Begins

**Action dependent on moving forward with classification*

Discussion

- What are your initial thoughts on the possible Open Space Classification?
- How can the Regional Parks and Trails System help to make the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area more resilient to the effects of climate change?
- What other topics do you think the Agency-Council Climate and Natural Systems workgroup could focus on?





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