



## News Release

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October 29, 2025

### **Teacher registration open for 2026 ZOOMS STEM Design Challenge at the Minnesota Zoo**

*This year's program challenges students to design a Zoo habitat  
and enrichment activities for its five California sea lions*

APPLE VALLEY, Minn. – The Minnesota Zoo is welcoming teachers from across the country to sign up so their students can take part in the [ZOOMS STEM Design Challenge](#) presented by Flint Hills Resources. Teachers for grades three through 12 are encouraged to register for this award-winning educational program by November 14 so their students can be among the thousands participating in this unique experiential learning opportunity.

Now entering its 12th year, this hands-on educational program welcomes thousands of elementary, middle and high school students nationwide to design solutions for habitat or enrichment challenges at the Zoo. Over the next several months, students will work in groups to learn and apply STEM concepts as they tackle the Zoo's latest real-world challenge: creating an engaging habitat and enrichments – activities that make an animal's environment more stimulating – for five California sea lions. Students will present their proposed solutions to the Zoo and, in March, top groups will be selected to visit the Zoo to showcase their designs to staff and professional engineers from Flint Hills Resources. Standout teams will earn prizes in categories including conservation, innovation, teamwork and more.

“The ZOOMS STEM Design Challenge is such an energizing opportunity for students—it brings learning to life in a way few experiences can,” said John Frawley, director of the Minnesota Zoo and president of the Minnesota Zoo Foundation. “Through teamwork and creative problem-solving, students are applying STEM skills to tackle real challenges that make a difference. We’re grateful to our long-time partners at Flint Hills Resources and can’t wait to see the innovation these young minds will bring this year.”

This year's featured animal, the California sea lion, is a relatively new addition to the Minnesota Zoo, first arriving in spring 2024. Zookeepers continue to look for new ways to keep these intelligent and athletic marine mammals busy and mentally engaged. Supporting this need,

students will have the opportunity to either reimagine a new indoor/outdoor habitat for the Zoo's five sea lions or design enrichments that could be included in the sea lions' habitat.

"Over the years, we've seen that the ZOOMS STEM Design Challenge connects students with wildlife in a way that gets them excited about learning science, engineering and math skills. The team at the Minnesota Zoo does an incredible job of providing a one-of-a-kind educational experience. We are excited for this year's program and to see what these imaginative students will create," said Heather Rein, director of community affairs at Flint Hills Resources.

The ZOOMS STEM Design Challenge is made possible by a partnership between the Minnesota Zoo and Flint Hills Resources, which started in 1989. Student participation has grown exponentially since the program launched, expanding from fewer than 100 in 2014 to more than 5,000 students annually in recent years. As the program has grown, the Minnesota Zoo has received top honors from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums for the success of the ZOOMS STEM Design Challenge.

#### **About the Minnesota Zoo**

The Minnesota Zoo is a year-round destination providing a window into the natural world. With hundreds of species of animals, worldwide conservation efforts and acres of scenic beauty, the Zoo is a resource to connect people, animals and the natural world to save wildlife. For more information visit [mnzoo.org](http://mnzoo.org). The Minnesota Zoo is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and an institutional member of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA).

#### **About Flint Hills Resources Pine Bend refinery**

The Flint Hills Resources Pine Bend refinery produces transportation fuels used throughout the Midwest, including most of Minnesota's gasoline, diesel fuel and jet fuel, as well as other products people rely on such as propane and asphalt. Located 17 miles southeast of Minneapolis, Pine Bend has a refining capacity of 375,000 barrels per day and is among the most efficient and safest oil refineries in the country. Flint Hills Resources directly and indirectly supports more than 4,000 Minnesota jobs and has invested nearly \$1.7 billion in upgrades and improvements to its Minnesota facilities since 2010. With 1,000 full-time employees, the Flint Hills Resources Pine Bend refinery is one of the largest employers in Dakota County. More information about the Pine Bend refinery is available at [PineBendRefinery.com](http://PineBendRefinery.com).

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