



Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund

Protecting Our Lands, Our Waters, Our Way of Life

For almost 30 years, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has been a **highly successful public-private partnership**, protecting our lakes and streams, securing critical wildlife habitat and providing world-class recreation opportunities.

The Program has also proven to be a **wise investment in advancing our state's tourism and forest products industries**, both of which are based on the long-term sustainable use of our precious natural resources.

There is no question that the Stewardship Program has accomplished great things, yet with expected increases in growth and development, more extreme weather events and greater demand for outdoor recreational opportunities, **we need a strong, well-funded Stewardship Program now more than ever.**

We all reap the benefits of the Stewardship Program:

CLEAN WATER: The Stewardship Program keeps our waters clean by protecting the forests, wetlands and grasslands that filter out pollutants in runoff before they reach our lakes, rivers and groundwater.

GROUNDWATER PROTECTION: Some areas of Wisconsin are particularly important to the long-term health and security of our groundwater supply. As Wisconsin grows, protecting the lands that are critical to the replenishment of our groundwater will be critical to ensure a consistent supply of clean, safe water.

FLOOD PROTECTION: Wisconsin has experienced major flood events more frequently in recent years, which have devastated communities, roads and other infrastructure. The Stewardship Program has helped cities like Milwaukee protect wetlands and forests along rivers upstream to store water and help reduce the risk of severe flooding downstream.

RECREATION ECONOMY: Each year, 2.9 million people participate in hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching in Wisconsin, contributing \$3.9 billion to the state economy. Stewardship has protected hundreds of thousands of acres of land and hundreds of river miles for outdoor recreation.

WILDLIFE: Wisconsin's northern forests, together with Michigan's and Minnesota's, are home to the highest diversity of breeding birds in North America. The Stewardship Program has helped protect large blocks of forest for birds, elk, bears, wolves and other wildlife that need room to roam.

URBAN OUTDOOR OPPORTUNITIES: Studies show that getting outdoors in nature is good for our health. The Stewardship Program must continue to provide outdoor opportunities near home for all Wisconsin residents, including more trails and parks for those living in cities and surrounding urban areas.

WORKING LANDS: The Stewardship Program has protected more than 250,000 acres of working forest in northern Wisconsin, along with the forest jobs and products they provide. In the next 3 to 5 years, we may have the opportunity to protect additional acres of working forest and the Stewardship Program will allow us to take advantage of that opportunity.



Our Recommendations for Reauthorization

The Nature Conservancy played an important role in the creation of the Stewardship Program, and we have been one of its strongest champions bringing millions of private dollars to Wisconsin conservation each year. We make the following recommendations to ensure that this vital program continues to work for Wisconsin today and for future generations.

- 1. REAUTHORIZE FOR 10 YEARS**
Land transactions can be complex and require years of planning. ***The Program should be reauthorized for 10 years.***
- 2. MAINTAIN THE PROGRAM'S PURCHASING POWER**
With a rapidly closing window of opportunity to conserve special places due to increasing development and rising land prices, the purchasing power of the Stewardship Program is not keeping up with the demand for natural and recreation lands. ***The Program should be reauthorized with robust funding.***
- 3. MAXIMIZE PARTNERSHIPS WITH LAND TRUSTS AND LOCAL UNITS OF GOVERNMENT**
Nonprofit organizations and local units of government (LUGs) have been invaluable partners in helping to meet the state's conservation and recreation goals by matching grant funds with private and federal dollars, involving local communities in land conservation, and assuming management responsibility for land they protect. ***The overall allotments for grant monies to nonprofits and LUGs should each be increased to \$10 million per year.***
- 4. RESTORE THE WISCONSIN DNR'S ROLE AS A STRONG PARTNER IN LAND PROTECTION**
Changes to the Program over time have curbed the Wisconsin DNR's ability to be a strong partner in land and water protection. ***The Program should increase the funding available to the Department to purchase land, give it more flexibility in how it protects land (use of direct acquisition and easements), and allow it to expand and purchase important conservation lands outside project boundaries.***
- 5. RESTORE THE PROGRAM'S FLEXIBILITY**
Increasing land prices and changes over time in the Joint Finance Committee review process for Stewardship grants have resulted in more projects requiring review and longer delays in grant awards. ***Changes could be made to improve the JFC review process including 1) increase the grant amount that triggers a review from \$250,000 to \$750,000 and 2) restore transparency to review process when objections are raised so they can be resolved more quickly.***

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