

To: All Legislators

DT: May xx, 2021

Re: Support for long-term reauthorization of Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program

We write to express our support for a 10-year reauthorization of the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program, as well as continued robust funding. This important program fuels key sectors of Wisconsin's economy, particularly the outdoor recreation industry. We represent hunting, fishing, forestry, and conservation groups as well as local governments, recreation, and business interests.

For 30 years, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has been protecting our lakes and streams, purchasing and developing parks and trails close to home, providing world-class recreational opportunities across the state, and supporting critical wildlife habitat. Let's keep it that way.

Stewardship has been a resounding success. Because of Knowles-Nelson, local governments and nonprofit groups receive state matching grants to purchase land or easements for forestry, conservation, and recreation. And we have a vital source of funding for the development and maintenance of our waterways, parks, and trail systems.

All Wisconsinites benefit from Knowles-Nelson. Parks, boating facilities, and paths close to home provide recreational opportunities and help businesses attract and retain a talented workforce. Intact forests support the timber economy and are home to thousands of miles of trails. Conserved wetlands protect our communities from floodwaters and filter our drinking water. **Today, we need a renewed long-term commitment to Wisconsin's land, water, and recreation infrastructure.**

Overwhelming, Bipartisan Support for Continuing the Stewardship Program

A 2020 statewide survey found that 92% of respondents want their legislators to "continue to protect natural areas, wildlife habitat, and parks in Wisconsin through the Stewardship Program," rather than stopping those conservation actions (a mere four percent).¹ This view cuts across party lines, with 88 percent of Republicans, 90 percent of independents and 97 percent of Democrats saying they want legislators to continue the program.

Outdoor Recreation

In the past year, more people than ever have taken advantage of our state's outdoor recreation opportunities, and we all expect that demand to continue. Outdoor recreation is a significant driver of economic activity in Wisconsin. **According to a 2020 study by the Wisconsin**

¹ "Polls Find Overwhelming Support for Knowles Nelson Stewardship Fund in Wisconsin." WI Public Radio, <https://www.wxpr.org/post/polls-find-overwhelming-support-knowles-nelson-stewardship-fund-wisconsin#stream/0>

Department Tourism, more than 93,000 jobs are supported by outdoor recreation, and \$7.8 billion is contributed to the state gross domestic product by the outdoor recreation industry. For example:

- The Ice Age Trail, one of less than a dozen National Scenic Trails in the United States, has a \$355 million annual economic impact in Wisconsin.²
- Wisconsin residents spend \$1 billion to \$2 billion on snowmobiling each year.³
- A 2016 study from Trout Unlimited found that fishing in the Driftless Area brings in well over \$1.6 billion a year to local economies.
- An economic impact study by the Outdoor Industry Association shows cycling contributes \$1.4 billion to our state coffers and provides more than 13,000 jobs.

But without a 10-year reauthorization and robust funding of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, we will undermine this vitally important economic activity.

Stewardship Investments Returns Billions of Dollars in Benefits Each Year

Every year, lands conserved with Knowles-Nelson dollars return \$2 billion in natural services. That means that every year Knowles-Nelson Stewardship lands return nearly twice as much to Wisconsin as we have invested over the last 30 years.

Nature works for us every day as long as we protect its basic integrity. Climate regulation, flood mitigation, water supplies, biodiversity protection, and recreational opportunities are all services provided to us by Knowles-Nelson lands.

For more information on those benefits, as well as information on investments around the state, visit www.knowlesnelson.org.

Long-Term Certainty is Needed for the Program

In the last state budget, the Legislature and Governor only approved a two-year extension of the Stewardship Program. That short timeframe severely limits the ability of nonprofit groups and local governments to plan, fundraise, and implement projects that benefit Wisconsin residents.

Planning and executing Stewardship projects can take many years, meaning landowners, funders, nonprofits, and local governments need certainty about the long-term future of the program for projects to be viable. In the two previous funding cycles, the Legislature reauthorized the program for 10 additional years each time in order to provide that needed assurance.

We urge the Legislature to continue to support this tremendously popular program by passing a long-term, well-funded reauthorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

² "An Analysis of Ice Age Trail Users" Fiscal and Economic Research Center, University of Wisconsin – Whitewater. 2020

³ Wisconsin Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2019 – 2023. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Madison, WI.