

What is the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program?

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program (KNSP) is Wisconsin's best way to support land and water conservation. KNSP provides funds for land acquisition, trail development, campgrounds, boat launches, and more.

How can the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program's impact be felt across Wisconsin?

Since its inception in 1989, the KNSP has helped permanently protect more than 750,000 acres in Wisconsin. The program has provided over 1,500 grants to land trusts & conservation nonprofit organizations, state park friends groups, and local governments, enabling improvements to parks, trails, and waterways. The program has made investments in all 72 counties across the state, and almost every Wisconsin resident has a KNSP-funded project within a mile or two of their home.

How is the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program funded?

The KNSP is primarily funded through general obligation bonds issued by the state of Wisconsin. The legislature authorizes funds, which are then made available through 20-year bonds and paid back over time, spreading the cost of long-term investments. A small portion of the program is also funded directly through tax dollars, known as general purpose revenue. This funding approach is typical for long-term government investments, similar to how individuals use mortgages to buy homes. The KNSP costs each Wisconsin resident about \$11 per year – less than a WI State Parks pass or annual fishing license.

How does Wisconsin's investment in public lands compare to neighboring states?

Compared to our neighbors, Wisconsin protects a smaller portion of its land than either Michigan or Minnesota. Additionally, we invest less money each year in our public lands and outdoor recreation than neighboring states do. In fact, Wisconsin ranks last in the country for state park spending, despite outdoor recreation adding \$9.8 billion to the state's economy in 2022 while supporting over 94,000 jobs.

Why should we continue to invest in the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program?

Over the past 30 years, the state has invested \$1.4 billion in the KNSP. In return, KNSP lands provide more than \$2.5 billion in value every single year. These lands offer numerous benefits, including water and air filtration, carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, wildlife habitat preservation, and extensive recreational opportunities for Wisconsin residents and visitors.

What happens if the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program is not renewed?

If not renewed in the 2025 state budget, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program will end in June 2026. Wisconsin will lose its primary tool for protecting natural areas, expanding outdoor recreation opportunities, and supporting conservation projects, public land acquisitions, and community grants.



MYTHBUSTING

"It costs too much."

The KNSP costs just \$11 per Wisconsin resident annually, debt service included. With the state's inflation-adjusted debt at a 25-year low, Wisconsin can invest in stewardship alongside priorities like education, roads, and healthcare while maintaining fiscal health. Additionally, the KNSP provides matching grants that stretch budgets further and maximize public funds: Grants to local governments are matched through local revenues, while grants to nonprofit organizations are matched through philanthropy and fundraising.

"There's already enough protected land."

While Wisconsin has made strides in land conservation, there's still room for improvement compared to neighboring states. Only 17% of Wisconsin's land is publicly owned, compared to 24% in Minnesota and 21% in Michigan, putting the state at a disadvantage in terms of public access to natural areas and the ecological benefits that come with protected lands. Moreover, the quality and connectivity of protected land matter. Since 2000, over 20% of large forest parcels in northern Wisconsin have been divided into smaller lots. This fragmentation harms wildlife, reduces habitat quality, and often limits public access.

"You can't harvest timber, hunt, fish, or recreate on conservation lands."

Knowles-Nelson lands are open to nature-based activities, including hiking, paddling, and skiing, as well as hunting, fishing, and trapping. Some properties even provide road access, and many protected areas are specifically conserved to support the forest products economy. For example, the Pelican River Forest produces about 25,000 cords of harvestable timber annually, valued at approximately \$1.1 million. By protecting this working forest, we safeguard a resource that supplies 17 timber mills and supports over 600 jobs in the local forest products industry.

"Conservation projects take properties off the tax rolls."

While some conservation projects do remove properties from local tax bases, many of the largest efforts actually keep land in private hands. Projects like the Pelican River Forest and the Brule-St. Croix Legacy Forest use conservation easements that protect the land's conservation values while maintaining private ownership. When states do acquire land for conservation, they often make payments in lieu of taxes to local governments, helping offset any lost property tax revenue.

"Conservation efforts are a drain on the state's economy and job market."

WI's outdoor recreation industry is a growing economic powerhouse, contributing \$9.8 billion to the state's GDP in 2022 while supporting over 94,000 jobs. Similarly, the state's forest products industry, which relies on sustainable forestry practices, contributed \$37.8 billion to the economy in 2021 and supported over 123,000 jobs.

"County forests in Wisconsin are closed to the public and only benefit large timber companies."

Wisconsin's 2.5 million acres of county forests boost local economies, and typically generate more revenue than comparable private lands enrolled in WI's Managed Forest Law program. County forests support tourism with trails for skiing, snowmobiling, and hiking. The KNSP provides matching grants county governments to expand these forests, ensuring continued public access and local economic benefits.

