

Lawmakers should reauthorize Wisconsin's signature land stewardship program for another decade

- [By Jessie Opoien](#) May 5, 2019

The Knowles-Nelson stewardship program, which allows the state to acquire land and easements, develop recreational facilities and restore wildlife habitats, has been reauthorized twice since its creation.

It's no surprise that a large majority of Wisconsinites support spending state money on environmental stewardship. We were home to Aldo Leopold, John Muir and Gaylord Nelson, and the outdoors remain a significant part of the state's identity, a focus of leisure time and a draw for out-of-state visitors.

Despite Wisconsin's proud environmental heritage, 84 percent of Wisconsin voters don't know much, if anything, about the [Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program](#), according to a 2018 survey commissioned by Gathering Waters and The Nature Conservancy.

In that same survey, however, 91 percent said they support the state Legislature dedicating public funding for land, water and wildlife conservation, and 80 percent had a favorable opinion of Knowles-Nelson once they found out that's exactly what it does.

These findings demonstrate why it's so important for lawmakers to get on board with a move to reauthorize Knowles-Nelson for another 10 years. Not just because it helps the state's environment by itself, but perhaps even more importantly because it provides crucial support for many similar efforts by other groups.

Created in 1989, bipartisanship is in the program's very name, which honors former Govs. Gaylord Nelson, a Democrat, and Warren Knowles, a Republican, who championed the acquisition of public land in Wisconsin. Spearheaded by Democratic state Rep. Spencer Black, passed by a

Democratic-controlled Legislature and signed by Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson, the program has always transcended party lines. That's an increasingly novel happening in this polarized state.

The stewardship program, which allows the state to acquire land and easements, develop recreational facilities and restore wildlife habitats, has been reauthorized twice since its creation — first in 1999 by Thompson and again in 2007 by Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle. Each reauthorization has allowed the program to continue for another decade. With the current term set to expire in 2020, it's time for elected officials and stakeholders to come back to the table and determine its future.

Last month, a coalition of more than 50 groups — including the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, the Wisconsin Realtors Association, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, Audubon Great Lakes and the Wisconsin Bike Fed — sent lawmakers [a letter](#) urging them to support another 10-year reauthorization at current funding levels. Wisconsin Conservation Voters and the Sierra Club did not sign the letter, but both organizations also support a 10-year extension.

“We believe firmly that Wisconsin is defined by its land and that we have to protect our public lands,” Wisconsin Conservation Voters spokesman Ryan Billingham told me. “We know that public lands are good for our health ... Getting outside and getting back to nature is something that not only helps us physically and emotionally, it also is one of the first ways people come into contact with the outdoors here in Wisconsin.”

Democratic Gov. Tony Evers, in his 2019-21 budget, proposed extending the program for two years, funded at current levels (\$33 million per year) with unobligated bonding — funds the program hasn't used in previous years. In [a letter](#) sent to the co-chairs of the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee last

week, Evers requested that an additional \$42.6 million in bonding authority be added to ensure a municipal flood control project in Trempealeau County remains funded.

“The extension of the program will allow the department and stakeholders to identify future options for the program,” according to Evers’ budget proposal.

Then, late last week, [Evers said](#) he supports reauthorizing Knowles-Nelson for 10 years — a move that would have been welcome in his initial spending plan.

To be clear, even with a two-year renewal, Evers’ budget demonstrates a commitment to preserving and protecting Wisconsin’s environment by increasing the state’s use of renewable energy, restoring scientist positions to the Department of Natural Resources and allocating substantial funds to clean up water in communities both urban and rural.

And by requesting a two-year renewal for Knowles-Nelson at current funding levels, Evers offers an improvement from the program’s treatment under Republican former Gov. Scott Walker, who repeatedly cut its budget and required it to sell several thousand acres of land. Evers’ position also stands in a contrast to those of some Republican lawmakers, who argue the program has accumulated too much land and racked up too much debt.

Given the precarious and polarized nature of relationships in the state Capitol, a two-year reauthorization is not enough.

Is it time, 30 years after the program’s formation, to discuss potential changes and improvements? Absolutely.

Gathering Waters executive director Mike Carlson thinks so, too, but not at the risk of delaying a long-term deal and setting the stage for another funding debate in two years.

“We’re still supportive of the idea of bringing stakeholders together to talk about improvements to the program, but not at the risk of losing long-term funding for it,” Carlson told me.

The stewardship program is an “integral cog” in wetland conservation efforts throughout the state, explained Brian Glenzinski, Wisconsin biologist for Ducks Unlimited. The organization has secured \$36 million in federal North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant funds for Wisconsin, most of which would not have been possible without a match from the Knowles-Nelson program, he said.

“The machine that’s at work is really unique and probably more delicate than most people understand, and so removing a cog like the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program can collapse the whole machine,” he told me.

In other words, not only is the program important on its own, it also plays a key role in bringing federal grant dollars to Wisconsin. Those efforts take time, often coming together over a period of years as organizations leverage different funding streams to pay for projects, Glenzinski said. A two-year reauthorization window would introduce too much doubt to the process.

“When you have a two-year extension of a program, that’s really not enough time for a conservation community to negotiate, close and do everything that needs to be done to secure these other lands, and so a 10-year window is really a realistic time frame to actually bring these partnerships together,” Glenzinski said.

State Rep. Joel Kitchens, R-Sturgeon Bay, submitted a budget motion request last month to renew the program for 10 years at its current funding level, with the ability to adjust funding in future years.

"I support reauthorizing the program for 10 years and am glad to hear this has bipartisan support. I look forward to working with stakeholders to ensure the program thrives for generations to come," Evers said in a tweet last week.

This is the right move. Any revisions to the program, including its funding levels, ought to take place with the assurance that it will continue for at least another decade.

Wisconsin's stewardship program is an investment that will benefit the state for generations to come. Lawmakers should do all they can to preserve it.

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