

WISCONSIN COUNTY FORESTS ASSOCIATION

KNOWLES-NELSON STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM REAUTHORIZATION

Authorized in FY 2011, the County Forest Subprogram has been one of the most cost effective and efficient uses of Knowles-Nelson Stewardship funds. It is one of the few uses of the Stewardship funds which actually produces revenue and a positive rate of return on its investment, most of which goes back into local coffers to be invested elsewhere.

Wisconsin counties hold and manage significant acres enrolled under Wisconsin's County Forest Law (State Statutes §28.10 & §28.11). Citizens and visitors of Wisconsin value these County Forests because not only do they provide reliable raw materials for the State's \$24 billion forest products industry, they also ensure public access and recreation amenities on more than 2.4 million acres of forested lands in 30 Wisconsin counties. These county forests are a large part of what makes Wisconsin unique and collectively they make up the largest public forested land holdings in the State.

The State's investment in the County Forest Subprogram currently leverages 50% local match, and to date, this subprogram has resulted in the acquisition and enrollment of 26,942 acres of additional public lands, in 15 county forests, into §28.11, at a total cost of \$41.6 million, \$20.8 million being Stewardship funding. Besides being open for public recreational use into perpetuity and providing numerous environmental and socio-economic benefits, these lands have already generated over \$1.6 million in revenue to county governments from the sale of timber, reducing local tax burdens. These timber sales are estimated to have produced another \$2.85 million of economic benefits as additional jobs and businesses utilize these forest products.

County Forest land acquisitions are proven to be of great value for Wisconsin, both for citizens and visitors. According to the USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Survey, the average price per acre for forest land transactions in Wisconsin in 2018 was \$2,349/acre. The average price per acre for County Forest land acquisitions under the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program is approximately \$1,547/acre, with \$773/acre coming from the Stewardship Program, a 300% decrease from open market prices.

Stewardship funds have been critical to the recent growth of Wisconsin's County Forests, and many counties plan on utilizing the program in the next decade. It is doubtful many of the public land acquisitions would have taken place without the availability of these funds, and many counties would not have a land acquisition program without it. County funding is limited and often not readily available when willing sellers come forth. Lands to be purchased under the County Forest Subprogram are prioritized under a ranking system developed between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Wisconsin County Forests Association. This ranking system only moves forward potential acquisitions which are sound, high-quality investments, and that often provide many environmental and economic benefits to the counties and the general public.

Lands to be purchased must be within established County Forest boundaries, often reducing costs and increasing efficiencies of future management activities in the area.

In addition, Wisconsin's County Forests are critical to the state's outdoor recreation industry providing over 8,400 miles of managed snowmobile trails, 1,860 miles of ATV trails, 540 miles of designated hiking trails, 460 miles of ski trails, 670 miles of bike trails, 2,780 campsites, 320 boat landings, and many more. To keep pace with ever-expanding demand, investment in the development, restoration, and modernization of facilities is essential.

Developments such as parking lots, trailheads, restrooms, and other amenities are highly-valued by residents and tourists, but are currently not eligible uses of County Forest Subprogram allocations or carry-forward balances. Investments in nature-based recreational development on county land in counties with land enrolled under Wisconsin's Forest Law will further increase the State's return on investment in the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

Wisconsin County Forests Association supports the reauthorization of the County Forest Subprogram of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program and maintaining the \$3 million annually set aside to provide land acquisition grants to counties. We also request statutory language be amended to allow nature-based recreational development grants under the County Forest Subprogram of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund at the 50% match level.

CURRENT STATUS: The State's investment in the County Forest Subprogram currently leverages 50% local match, and to date, this subprogram has resulted in the acquisition and enrollment of 26,942 acres of additional public lands, in 15 county forests, into \$28.11, at a total cost of \$41.6 million, \$20.8 million being Stewardship funding.

RECOMMENDATION: Request the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship County Forest Subprogram be reauthorized and funded at current levels, and be amended to allow nature-based recreational development grants under the County Forest Subprogram.