

KNOWLES – NELSON STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM REAUTHORIZATION

The Wisconsin County Forests Association respectfully requests:

- **The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship County Forest Subprogram be reauthorized and funded at FY2019-2020 levels, and be amended to allow nature-based recreational development grants under the County Forest Subprogram.**

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 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 opportunities providing 9,130 miles of managed snowmobile trails, 1,730 miles of ATV trails, 504 miles of designated hiking trails, 460 miles of ski trails, 396 miles of bike trails, 3,340 campsites, 280 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 \$5 million annually set aside under 2015 Act 55 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.

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Success Stories under the Wisconsin County Forests Subprogram

Chippewa County – Dog Island Lake Acquisition

Stewardship funding was utilized in 2009 by the West Wisconsin Land Trust to acquire 120 acres of forest and shoreline property on Dog Island Lake and a portion of Roger Lake in the Town of Sampson and subsequently sold to Chippewa County. This acquisition provides public access for hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, mountain biking, horseback riding, trail running and nature observation. This tract is an important connection between DNR property and the Chippewa County Forest maintaining a wildlife corridor through the area and providing more suitable access to Roger Lake and the adjacent John Thurman Wildlife Area. A section of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail is present on this property. This acquisition enabled Chippewa County and its partners to increase the size of the Hickory Ridge Cross Country Ski Trail system, a premier trail system frequently used by competitive skiers. The former residence on the tract was converted to a warming house for skiers.

Douglas County – Timber Harvests on Land Acquired with Stewardship Funds

Since the Knowles/Nelson Stewardship County Forest Subprogram was established in Fiscal Year 2011, Douglas County has acquired 7,420 core and 820 match acres under the program. Timber management activities conducted on several of these parcels have generated over \$273,000 in stumpage revenue with another \$12,000 expected from existing contracts. These funds are used to cover County expenses and reduce the tax burden on local citizens while sustaining healthy, productive forests. These sales have also provided \$27,300 of road severance payments to local towns with County Forest lands and an estimated \$6.4 million worth of added economic benefits as secondary jobs and businesses utilize these forest products.

Florence County – Gunnulson Acquisition

Several public benefits were obtained with the acquisition of this 214-acre property in the Town of Homestead in 2019 including improving access to a large block of public land for recreational and management activities. This acquisition ensured long term rights for a highly used snowmobile trail through the area and fostered the replacement of a key bridge crossing over the Little Popple River. With this purchase an additional .6 mile stretch of this Class 2 trout stream was now open to the public. The acquisition added productive forest land next to other County land making management more efficient and protecting the areas watershed. This tract, previously closed to the public, is now open for hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, biking and horseback riding.

Iron County – Forestland Group Purchase at Saxon Harbor

This 2017 acquisition was critical to safely relocate portions of Iron County's Saxon Harbor facility destroyed by a massive storm in 2016 and protect 1500 feet of Lake Superior shoreline. The 116-acre parcel added significantly to the public land holdings in this coastal area of Lake Superior. This addition helps provide an important connection for hikers to the North Country Trail in Michigan, a goal identified in the Iron County Outdoor Recreation Plan. The unique topography of the tract, dissected by deep (100') ravines and overlooks of Lake Superior, provide tremendous scenic and conservation value. The parcel has historic interest with the Flambeau Trail accessing Lake Superior. This acquisition provides many other public use benefits including hunting, fishing, hiking, beach access, outdoor photography, cross country skiing, snowshoeing and a connector for an area snowmobile trail. This area is an important stop-over area

for migratory birds and an excellent viewing site for bald eagles and osprey perching in the tall pines scattered throughout the parcel. Two state threatened plants thrive in the tracts moist, steep ravines. Already a popular recreational area, this acquisition provides greater access to the Lake Superior shoreline and allows more people to utilize this scenic area.

Jackson County – Starlight Acquisition

This important 290-acre acquisition would not have been possible without Stewardship funding and a partnership between the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Jackson County. Acquisition of this property secured a critical block of elk habitat for the recently established elk herd in the region. This acquisition is entirely productive forestland, with an estimated value of nearly \$150,000 of standing timber. Besides reducing the local tax burden within their county, townships with County Forest in their boundaries receive 10% of those revenues when wood is harvested. An existing, electrified pole shed on the property is being used by the County and a local snowmobile club plan for equipment storage. This acquisition expands public recreational lands in the county, a significant recreation destination for Madison, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Chicago metropolitan regions due to ease of access off I-94. Acquiring these lands opened up areas previously closed to the public for hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, biking, and primitive camping.

Oconto County – Vandehei Acquisition

This 30-acre tract in the Town of Breed, was added to the Oconto County Forest in 2020 with crucial funding from the Stewardship program. This tract, located adjacent to county forest land to the east and State lands to the north and south, provides important access to public land and water resources in the area. Included with this acquisition is access to the South Branch of the Oconto River, a Class 1 trophy trout stream. Plans are to develop a public parking area with enhanced walk-in access to the stream to improve recreational fishing opportunities. Existing timber resources on the property are scheduled for a harvest in the near future provided jobs and funding to benefit the local economy. This tract also includes habitat for one Special Concern beetle and a state protected turtle.

Vernon County – McKibben Acquisition

Stewardship funds were essential to enable Vernon County to acquire this critical 44.87-acre tract in the Town of Jefferson in 2018. This private tract, bordered on three sides by County Forest land and adjacent to the Esofea County Park, greatly improves access to County Forest lands for timber management and public recreational opportunities, including hunting, hiking, cross country skiing, trapping and fishing. This acquisition nearly doubles the amount of public frontage on the North Fork of the Bad Axe River, a Class II trout stream. The addition of 2,300 feet of frontage also increases opportunities for stream rehabilitation projects being supported by Trout Unlimited. This tract includes 16.5 acres of Southern Mesic Forest, a Special Concern habitat in the state and two Special Concern wildlife species.

