

CO-SPONSORSHIP MEMORANDUM

To: All Legislators

From: Senators Jodi Habush Sinykin, Kelda Roys, Tim Carpenter, Kristin Dassler-Alfheim, Dora Drake, Dianne Hesselbein, LaTonya Johnson, Sarah Keyeski, Chris Larson, Brad Pfaff, Melissa Ratcliff, Jeff Smith, Mark Spreitzer, Jamie Wall, Bob Wirsch

Representatives Vinnie Miresse, Angela Stroud, Lori Palmeri, Clinton Anderson, Deb Andraca, Margaret Arney, Mike Bare, Jill Billings, Brienne Brown, Ryan Clancy, Angelina Cruz, Karen DeSanto, Ben DeSmidt, Steve Doyle, Jodi Emerson, Joan Fitzgerald, Russell Goodwin, Kalan Haywood, Francesca Hong, Andrew Hysell, Jenna Jacobson, Alex Joers, Tara Johnson, Karen Kirsch, Darrin Madison, Renuka Mayadev, Maureen McCarville, Tip McGuire, Supreme Moore Omokunde, Greta Neubauer, Sylvia Ortiz-Velez, Christian Phelps, Priscilla Prado, Amaad Rivera-Wagner, Ann Roe, Joe Sheehan, Lee Snodgrass, Ryan Spaude, Shelia Stubbs, Lisa Subeck, Sequanna Taylor, Angelito Tenorio, Randy Udell, Robyn Vining.

Date: August 26, 2025

Re: Co-sponsorship of LRB-3744 and LRB-XXXX, relating to: the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship 2000 program and making an appropriation

Deadline: Tuesday, September 9, 2025

For more than 35 years, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has stood as one of Wisconsin's most successful bipartisan conservation initiatives. Established under Governor Tommy Thompson and named for two of our state's greatest conservation leaders, this program reflects Wisconsin's proud heritage of conservation of our lands, waters, and outdoor traditions.

Through Knowles-Nelson, generations of Wisconsinites have enjoyed expanded access to hunting and fishing, protection of wildlife habitat, miles of recreational trails, and improved public lands and local parks. Investments made through the program have strengthened our \$11 billion outdoor recreation and tourism economy, supported working lands and forests, and ensured that future generations can enjoy the natural beauty that makes Wisconsin so special.

Public support for the program could not be stronger. **Recent statewide polling found that 93% of Wisconsinites support dedicated funding for conservation, like the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.**

LRB-3744 reauthorizes the program for six years, through fiscal year 2031-32, and provides \$72 million annually in bonding authority. Importantly, this proposal also makes long-overdue updates to ensure the program can better meet today's conservation and outdoor recreation needs.

The bill also creates a "Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Board" to serve as a diverse, representative advisory and oversight body for the program to ensure transparency and accountability, while insulating the program from partisan gridlock.

This bill represents a starting point for discussions around Knowles-Nelson throughout the remainder of this session, and we look forward to further conversations with stakeholders, and colleagues in both parties to find a bipartisan solution.

To be added as a co-sponsor for this bill, please reply to this email or contact Sen. Habush Sinykin at 608-266-5830 or Sen.habushsinykin@legis.wisconsin.gov, or contact Rep. Miresse at Rep.miresse@legis.wisconsin.gov or 608-237-9171. All co-sponsors to the Assembly Bill will be added to the Senate version unless otherwise requested.

Analysis by the Legislative Reference Bureau

This bill reauthorizes the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship 2000 Program (stewardship program) until 2032 and makes various changes to the program.

WARREN KNOWLES-GAYLORD NELSON STEWARDSHIP 2000 PROGRAM

Current law authorizes the state to incur public debt for certain conservation activities under the stewardship program, which is administered by the Department of Natural Resources. The state may incur this debt to acquire land for the state for conservation purposes and for property development activities and may award grants or state aid to certain local governmental units and nonprofit conservation organizations (NCOs) to acquire land for these purposes. Current law establishes the amounts that DNR may obligate in each fiscal year through fiscal year 2025-26 for expenditure under each of five subprograms of the stewardship program.

This bill increases the total amount that may be obligated for the stewardship program from \$33,250,000 each fiscal year to \$72,000,000 each fiscal year beginning with fiscal year 2026-27 and ending with fiscal year 2031-32.

Land acquisition subprogram

The bill increases the amount that may be obligated under the land acquisition subprogram each fiscal year from \$16,000,000 to \$17,200,000. The bill increases the

amount under the land acquisition subprogram that must be set aside for grants to nonprofit conservation organizations each fiscal year from \$7,000,000 to \$11,350,000.

Moneys obligated under the stewardship program are appropriated from the capital improvement fund (CIF) and stewardship bond proceeds are deposited into CIF. Current law provides that, in obligating moneys under the subprogram for land acquisition, DNR must set aside certain amounts to be obligated only for DNR to acquire land and to provide grants to counties for land acquisition (county forest grants). Specifically, the set-aside for DNR land acquisition each fiscal year is \$1,000,000 plus the amount transferred to CIF under an appropriation that transfers from moneys received for forestry activities (the forestry account) to CIF \$5,000,000 in each fiscal year. The set-aside for county forest grants is equal to the amount transferred to CIF under an appropriation that transfers from the forestry account to CIF \$3,000,000 in each fiscal year. The bill ends these annual transfers from the forestry account to CIF beginning in fiscal year 2026-27 and instead appropriates amounts directly to fund those purposes from the conservation fund. Specifically, the bill appropriates \$6,000,000 each fiscal year from the conservation fund for DNR land acquisitions and \$3,000,000 each fiscal year from the forestry account for county forest grants. In addition, the bill requires that \$5,850,000 be set aside under the land acquisition subprogram of the stewardship program to be obligated for DNR land acquisitions. The bill provides that any amount in CIF remaining from the amounts transferred from the forestry account in fiscal years 2022-23, 2023-24, 2024-25, and 2025-26 is transferred back to the forestry account in fiscal year 2026-27.

The bill eliminates a current law provision that states that, of the amount set aside under the land acquisition subprogram for DNR to acquire land, DNR may not use more than one-third to acquire land in fee simple. In addition, the bill eliminates a provision requiring DNR to use at least two appraisals to determine the current fair market value of land that is the subject of a stewardship funding for an NCO or governmental unit if DNR estimates the fair market value of the land to exceed \$350,000.

State property development and local parks and recreation subprogram

The bill renames the property development and local assistance subprogram to be the “state property development and local parks and recreation subprogram,” and increases the amount in each fiscal year that may be obligated under the subprogram from \$14,250,000 to \$45,000,000. Of that amount, the bill increases the amount that DNR must obligate for property development each fiscal year from \$5,000,000 to \$15,000,000 and increases the amount that DNR must obligate for local assistance each fiscal year from \$9,250,000 to \$30,000,000.

The bill increases from \$500,000 to \$1,500,000 the amount that DNR is required to set aside each fiscal year, from the amounts obligated for property development, for grants to friends groups and NCOs for property development activities on DNR properties. The bill

also increases from \$20,000 to \$50,000 the maximum amount that DNR may encumber per DNR property for these grants in each fiscal year.

Motorized recreation subprogram

The bill creates a motorized recreation subprogram of the stewardship program, and authorizes DNR to obligate \$2,000,000 each fiscal year under that subprogram to award grants to a county, city, village, town, or recreational vehicle club either to acquire land for the purpose of establishing an all-terrain vehicle trail, off-highway motorcycle trail, or snowmobile trail or to construct a trail crossing for an all-terrain vehicle trail, off-highway motorcycle trail, or snowmobile trail as part of an interchange project.

Local recreation boat facilities subprogram

The bill renames the recreational boating aids subprogram to be the “local recreation boat facilities subprogram” and increases the amount in each fiscal year that DNR may obligate under the subprogram from \$3,000,000 to \$7,800,000. The bill eliminates DNR’s authority under current law to use funds, whether stewardship or other funds, for recreational boating project feasibility studies. The bill changes one of the factors that DNR must consider in establishing priorities for projects from “projects underway” to “projects in a state of readiness.”

Knowles-Nelson stewardship board

The bill creates the Knowles-Nelson stewardship board in DNR, with the responsibilities of providing advice to DNR on all stewardship land acquisition projects and activities and reviewing all stewardship land acquisition projects and activities requiring an obligation of over \$2,500,000 (large land acquisition projects). Under the bill, DNR may not obligate any stewardship moneys for a large land acquisition project unless it first notifies the Knowles-Nelson stewardship board in writing of the proposal. Under the bill, if, within 120 days after the date of DNR’s notification, the board does not meet to review the proposal, then DNR may obligate the moneys. If, within 120 days after the date of DNR’s notification, the board meets to review the proposal, DNR may obligate the moneys only upon approval of the board. Under the bill, the board must meet at least quarterly and has the following members appointed by the governor for staggered three-year terms:

1. One member who is a representative to the assembly, nominated by the majority leader of the assembly.
2. One member who is a representative to the assembly, nominated by the minority leader of the assembly.
3. One member who is a senator, nominated by the majority leader of the senate.
4. One member who is a senator, nominated by the minority leader of the senate.

5. Two members who represent environmental organizations or nonprofit conservation organizations in this state.
6. Two members who each represent organizations that represent hunting, fishing, or trapping interests in this state.
7. Two members who represent DNR, including one member of the natural resources board.
8. One member who represents the office of outdoor recreation in the department of natural resources.
9. One member who represents an outdoor recreation business in this state.
10. One member who represents the Ice Age Trail Alliance.
11. One member who represents a federally recognized American Indian tribe or band in this state.
12. One member who is a representative of local government in this state who occupies an executive or legislative post.
13. Two members who are citizens of this state.

New grant programs

The bill creates two new programs and funds them with appropriations from the general fund. Specifically, the bill creates a grant program for nonprofit conservation organizations to support wildlife and habitat management, and a tribal co-management program under which DNR must coordinate with the federally recognized American Indian tribes or bands domiciled in this state in the management of education infrastructure, land management activities, and other activities on DNR land.

For further information see the state and local fiscal estimate, which will be printed as an appendix to this bill.