



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE
P.O. BOX 8952 • MADISON, WI 53708

**Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Forestry,
Parks and Outdoor Recreation**

Assembly Bill 315

Rep. Tony Kurtz and Sen. Pat Testin

Good Morning Chairman Mursau and members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Assembly Bill 315 today.

Wisconsin's stewardship program was created in 1989 Wisconsin Act 31 to acquire land to expand nature-based outdoor recreational opportunities and protect environmentally sensitive areas. 1999 Wisconsin Act 9, the 1999-2001 biennial budget act, expanded the program, adding several funding categories that exist today, and renamed the program after Wisconsin Governors Warren Knowles and Gaylord Nelson.

Since its creation in 1989, the program has been reauthorized four times—in 1999 Wisconsin Act 9, 2007 Wisconsin Act 20, 2019 Wisconsin Act 9, and 2021 Wisconsin Act 58. 2021 Act 58 reauthorized the program for a four-year period, from fiscal years 2022-23 to 2025-26, at an annual allotment of \$33.25 million, including \$8 million from the forestry account of the SEG conservation fund and \$25.25 million in bonds. This reauthorization expires on June 30, 2026.

AB-315, would reauthorize the program for four more years, through June 30, 2030 at a total annual bonding amount of \$13.25 million annually. This bill does not fully reflect the spending we will be proposing, as this is the policy portion of the proposal and the SEG funding (\$15m annually for a total of \$28.25 annually) would be part of the budget and is drafted separately.

AB-315 creates a new Major Land Acquisition Program for DNR land acquisitions or stewardship grant awards for land acquisition exceeding \$1 million. Any fee-simple acquisition, easement, or acquisition of development rights would qualify as "land" under the provision. Land acquisition projects or stewardship grant awards for land acquisition with awards of \$1m or more in the DNR land acquisitions, Nature Conservation Organization (NCO) grants, county forest grants, and local assistance subprograms would all be under this program. Acquisitions under the \$1m limit would still be acquirable within the subprogram annual amount.



Annually, no later than January 15th, DNR would be required to submit to the Joint Committee on Finance and to the appropriate standing committees of the Legislature a list of all proposed major land acquisitions including estimated purchase prices, requested state funding sources, and non-state sources of funding. Proposed major land acquisitions would be enumerated by legislation. Given the enumeration process for land acquisitions under the major land acquisitions program, AB-315 does not specify funding levels for this program.

AB-315 additionally addresses several smaller policy provisions relating to the Stewardship Program to address concerns that have previously been expressed and help refocus the program on maintaining what we currently have, habitat restoration and property development. These items include:

- Expanding NCO subprogram to include a habitat restoration program
- Requiring DNR to prioritize funding projects for property development over land acquisition in all subprograms
- Requiring a 20% match from local units of government from their own funds
- Eliminating the minimum size of 10 acres for projects, which could allow for smaller projects in areas with less green space.
- Eliminating the 1/3 fee simple and 2/3 easement provision
- Limiting the total amount of funding an entity can receive to 40% for a project or acquisition that is closed on before applying for Stewardship funds.

It's important to note what we're proposing is not an agreed upon deal. It's an offer to provide a starting place to have open-minded conversations and ultimately find a good a place to ensure the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program's legacy continues. The bill will continue to change during the legislative process and we're actively working with stakeholders and colleagues in both chambers.

Thank you for your time today, we're happy to answer questions at this time.



Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

AB 315 Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship 2000 Program *June 11th, 2025*

Good morning, Chair Mursau and members of the Committee. My name is Steven Little, and I am the Deputy Secretary for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, for informational purposes, on AB 315, related to the Warren Knowles – Gaylord Nelson Stewardship 2000 Program.

Stakeholders, the legislature, and Governor Thompson came together in the late 1980s to create a legacy program to replace the Outdoor Recreation Action Program of the '60s, '70s, and '80s. Named after Republican Governor Warren Knowles and Democrat Governor Gaylord Nelson, Stewardship began a new era of funding to protect wildlife habitat from development and provide outdoor recreation opportunities throughout Wisconsin.

Besides funding state property acquisition, the legislature created Stewardship to leverage the fundraising prowess of non-profit organizations and capital investments by local units of government. In 1999, 2001, and 2007, the Republican-led Assembly and Democrat-led Senate recognized and acknowledged enough value to expand investments in Stewardship.

Beginning in 2011, the legislature began to reduce bonding levels for the program and eventually cash funded components were created.

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program is currently allocated \$33.25 million per year, with a mix of bonding authority and cash from the segregated Forestry Account. The program is authorized through the end of fiscal year 2026, and will end on June 30, 2026, unless it is reauthorized in some form.

The current program allocates about one-third of the funding to DNR projects, including property development and acquisition. The other two-thirds is used for local assistance grants, including recreational boating aids, as well as grants to nonprofit conservation organizations, county forests, and local units of government for the acquisition and development of local parks. Most of the local assistance grants are oversubscribed, seeing far more demand than the department has available to award. The grants to local units of government exemplify this problem, with the program routinely seeing applications that amount to three times the available grant funding.

The Governor's budget proposal sought to meet the significant demand for the Stewardship program. It proposed \$100 million per year for the next ten years, with a focus on getting this money into the hands of local governments and nonprofit organizations throughout the state. Over 75 percent of the funding in the Governor's budget would be used for grants, so local communities could ensure that everyone has access to quality outdoor recreation opportunities. He also proposed new subprograms that would enable

NCOs to do habitat and other maintenance work on lands, as well as a program for tribes and the state to jointly manage projects of high importance to tribal communities.

The remainder of the funding would be allocated to DNR priorities, with a focus on making progress on the backlog of mainly parks infrastructure projects that need to be completed across the state.

AB 315 is inextricably linked to LRB-3507 by their non statutory provisions, so when looking at the proposed Stewardship program, we are looking at both bill drafts together. The proposed program reduces Stewardship from \$33.25 million per year to \$28.25 million per year and extends the program through 2030. The reductions in funding are seen in the DNR land acquisition category, which goes from \$6 million to \$3 million, and the county forest grants category, which is reduced from \$3 million to \$1 million. There are no increases proposed for the oversubscribed subprograms.

Despite the county forest subprogram only receiving a \$1 million allocation for the next 4 years, the portion of the program that would be funded by the segregated forestry account is nearly doubled, with \$15 million per year coming from the forestry account, and the remaining \$13.25 million through bonding. Based on the drafting of LRB-3507, the department would not be able to implement any portions of the program supported by general obligation bonds. The draft reduces the total bonding authority for the Stewardship 2000 program from over \$1 billion to just \$53 million, a threshold the program crossed decades ago. LRB has indicated that this is a drafting error – we appreciate their help in fixing this oversight.

AB 315 also changes the match requirements for local units of government, requiring that no more than 30 percent of the required match come from outside grants and donations. This would prohibit these grantees from meeting their match requirements by leveraging as much federal funding, local donations or in-kind match. This would needlessly make projects more expensive for local communities.

Furthermore, the bill changes the definition of the word ‘obligate’ as it applies to stewardship, but not the rest of our programs. We are concerned about the potential implications of this change. For example, the change to the definition appears to immediately defund \$18.5 million dollars in property infrastructure projects that are currently under design and are awaiting State Building Commission authorization. These projects include things like [insert safety related item from Terry’s list], toilet shower facility upgrades, and replacing aged roofs at department properties. This only adds to the large backlog of infrastructure project work needed our state park system as I mentioned earlier.

Additionally, AB 315 would require certain land acquisition projects over \$1 million be enumerated through legislation. Enumeration can be a lengthy process and that could have detrimental impacts on the department’s or a grantee’s ability to acquire properties that are hard to come by. Sellers do not often want to wait such a long time and could likely find a buyer that would be able to close much more quickly. This would apply not only to DNR acquisitions, but also to grants for acquisitions that are being made by local units of government or nonprofit conservation organizations. The enumeration requirement could make significant portions of the Stewardship program ineffective due to the impact of time delays on closing.

Enumeration also impacts the administrative burden of the program. The more administrative complexity we see, the more communities will self select out of the program leading to disparate

benefits. Many local governments have resource constraints that impact the amount of time they are able to dedicate to these projects and this provision will exacerbate that problem. The administrative burden will also be increased by the provision that changes the available grant percentage, from 50 percent to 40 percent, of acquisition costs based on the timing of when a local unit of government closes on an acquisition. Again, this will make things more difficult on our most resource constrained communities.

We do appreciate that a few provisions of the Governor's budget were retained in this proposal, including the elimination of the requirement that two-thirds of DNR acquisition funding be spent on easements. This will give the department more flexibility in how land is acquired. Additionally, AB 315 would also allow the department to award grants to fund habitat management work by NCOs.

In closing, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has impacted every county in the state, and provides Wisconsinites with high quality outdoor recreation opportunities every single day. I appreciate the continued engagement on this program.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, we would like to thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

June 11, 2025

Dear Chairman Mursau and Members of the Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify for information only on Assembly Bill 315, which reauthorizes the Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program for an additional four years and makes several policy changes to the Program. I would also like to thank Representative Tony Kurtz and Senator Pat Testin, along with their staffs, for the extensive work they have done authoring legislation reauthorizing one of the nation's premiere land and water conservation programs.

My name is Alex Madorsky, and I work for The Nature Conservancy (TNC) as Associate Director of Government Relations. TNC is the world's largest conservation nonprofit operating in all 50 states and 79 countries around the globe. Here in Wisconsin, we are the state's largest land trust, and we collaborate closely with communities, recreational and agricultural groups, Tribal Nations, and other environmental organizations to protect natural resources for the benefit of all. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has helped TNC preserve over 240,000 acres of land which protect some of our state's most critically important species, forests, lands, and waters, as well as prime fishing, hunting, and trapping opportunities.

The Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program is named after two great Wisconsin statesmen committed to conservation and the environment. Warren Knowles, a Republican Governor, created Wisconsin's first land conservation program. Gaylord Nelson, a Democratic Governor and US Senator, is known to many in Wisconsin and around the world as the founder of Earth Day. Since 1989, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has continued to earn bipartisan support. TNC polling indicates 91% of Wisconsinites support continuing the Stewardship Program, which

is overwhelmingly popular regardless of where in the state they live or which party they typically support. 93% of Wisconsinites believe investing in natural areas is an important priority for state funding. Tourism is now a \$25.8 billion industry in Wisconsin, with 114 million visitors last year. Many of these visitors come to Wisconsin specifically to enjoy the types of recreational opportunities available on Stewardship land.

The Stewardship program also supports Wisconsin's \$42 billion forestry industry to continue to conduct sustainable timber harvesting that grows our economy and protects our ecosystems.

Assembly Bill 315 has a number of positive attributes and also raises a number of concerns about the future of land and water Stewardship in Wisconsin. We appreciate AB 315 doubling the Program's current reauthorization period from two years to four, although this is shy of the ten-year period the program was authorized for in 1989, 1999, and 2009. Complex negotiations with conservation-minded real estate owners on land purchases are often years in the making, and the more time available to close these sales and open lands up to recreation for all, the better. We also strongly support AB 315's proposal to provide new, first-time funding for the management of Stewardship lands. This funding will help nonprofit conservation programs and other Stewardship users ensure best management practices are utilized on Stewardship lands to maximize their economic and ecological benefits.

Similarly, continued sustained funding for the public-private grants available to conservation groups is useful for real estate planning. The Stewardship subprogram for nonprofit conservation groups is presently oversubscribed at the current level of \$7 million dollars a year, which is the same level of funding in AB 315. There is demonstrated demand for funding beyond this level, and we hope the bill authors and this Committee will consider raising this amount.

There are some aspects of AB 315 as currently written that can be improved upon. The new requirement for DNR to submit an annual slate of proposed Stewardship grants over \$1 million may inhibit the acquisition of lands that provide unprecedented opportunities for conservation and recreation. This is particularly true in southern Wisconsin and other parts of the state where real estate values continue to rise quickly. The process described in the bill does not appear to contain timelines regarding when or if committee hearings must be held on these projects, and it is unclear if an anonymous objection from a member of the Joint Finance Committee would indefinitely block one or more of these projects from moving forward. TNC strongly believes in continuing bipartisan legislative involvement in the Stewardship Program, but any restoration of an indefinite objection is not a sustainable solution. A process with clear procedural rules on any objections is necessary to maintain transparency in the process.

There are also questions in the bill about the ongoing ability of State Parks Friends Groups and DNR to acquire conservation lands. Present Stewardship stakeholders work together to ensure the future of Wisconsin's great outdoors, and a reduction in the ability of any Stewardship user to protect outdoor heritage reduces the effectiveness of the Program as a whole.

Assembly Bill 315 holds much promise but can be strengthened to protect our incredible natural resources and grow more jobs. Wisconsinites understand this; 93% of us believe the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program helps create jobs. I thank the Committee for holding a hearing on this important Stewardship legislation and keeping these important conversations going. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Alex Madorsky, Associate Director of Government Relations

A.R.Madorsky@tnc.org

Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks, and Outdoor Recreation
Testimony in Support of AB 315
Todd Schubring
Public Policy Chair – Ducks Unlimited Wisconsin
June 11, 2025

Good morning / afternoon,

Thank you, Chairman Mursau and members of the committee, for holding a hearing on this critically important topic and for the opportunity to provide our feedback and perspectives on this proposal.

My name is Todd Schubring. I am the volunteer Public Policy Chair for Ducks Unlimited in Wisconsin. With me is Brian Glenzinski – Director of Conservation Programs for Ducks Unlimited's Great Lakes Initiative.

Ducks Unlimited got its start during the Dust Bowl when North America's drought-plagued waterfowl populations had plunged to unprecedented lows. Determined not to sit idly by as the continent's waterfowl dwindled beyond recovery, a small group of waterfowl hunters joined together to form an organization that became known as Ducks Unlimited. Our mission: habitat conservation.

Thanks to decades of abiding by that single mission, Ducks Unlimited is now the world's largest and most effective private waterfowl and wetlands conservation organization. Our conservation work improves biodiversity, cleans water and protects communities from flooding and coastal erosion and provides a landscape for hunters and other outdoors enthusiasts.

Since our founding in 1937 by a small group of waterfowl hunters, Ducks Unlimited has conserved more than 19 million acres of wetlands and other waterfowl habitats across North America. In 2024 alone, Ducks Unlimited delivered more than 1 million acres of conservation across North America.

I provide this background on Ducks Unlimited to illustrate both the need that exists for conservation and the importance that we place to make sure it is delivered effectively.

Nowhere is conservation more important than right here in Wisconsin. We are fortunate to have a strong sporting heritage here in the Badger State, with hundreds of thousands of sportsmen and women taking advantage of our public lands each year. That tradition continues to thrive thanks, in part, to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

Since 1989, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has provided more access and opportunities for outdoor pursuits like hunting, fishing, and trapping. And for the last year, we have been working to ensure that Wisconsin's premier land conservation program will continue.

Ducks Unlimited applauds the work done by Rep. Tony Kurtz and Sen. Pat Testin to provide meaningful and long-overdue updates to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program and supports the framework laid out in AB 315

AB 315 will allow much needed improvements to be made to our existing public lands, while also ensuring that a useable program will continue with input from both the legislative and executive branches. This bill will allow the state and groups, like Ducks Unlimited, to partner and take better care of the public lands we currently hold.

For more than thirty years, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has helped provide more access and opportunities for Wisconsin's hunters, anglers, and trappers, and we are extremely pleased that members of the legislature are working to ensure that this continues.

I will now turn things over to Brian to highlight some specific provisions in the proposed legislation.

Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation
Testimony in support of AB 315
Brian Glenzinski
Director of Conservation Programs for Ducks Unlimited Great Lakes Initiative
June 11, 2025

Good morning / afternoon,

Thank you all for the opportunity to be here today.

As Todd mentioned, my name is Brian Glenzinski and I am the Director of Conservation Programs for Ducks Unlimited's Great Lakes Initiative.

In my role, I am intimately involved with our conservation work in Wisconsin and know first-hand the importance that the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has played in those efforts. Over the last several decades, Ducks Unlimited has delivered habitat conservation on nearly 150,000 acres in Wisconsin and the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program was a crucial component in making that happen. Knowles-Nelson Stewardship is critical cog in a complex conservation machine that underpins Wisconsin's multi-billion dollar outdoor recreation industry.

We are extremely pleased to see members of the legislature working to ensure that the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program will continue, and we support the framework laid out in AB 315.

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has delivered habitat for more than thirty years, but we also support changes to the program that will help update and enhance our existing public lands by providing much-needed habitat management opportunities and other improvements.

We are particularly pleased to see language which will allow moneys from Knowles-Nelson to be used to develop, manage, preserve, restore and maintain wildlife habitat on public lands to benefit game species and other wildlife.

However, we need to make certain that funding is directed to the highest and best use for the resource regardless of objectives. The language in the current draft simply requires the DNR to "prioritize wildlife habitat grants" over other grants within the NCO program. Habitat grants are very different from the other forms of grants awarded under the NCO program and it may be difficult for DNR to clearly determine which is a "priority".

Creating a separate subprogram or appropriation in the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program for habitat and restoration will ensure that this much needed work can be done on

our public lands. We ask that you consider an amendment which will allow the funding for this crucial work to be clearly separated so we can ensure that this type of work can be done on our public lands.

I appreciate your efforts to improve the conservation machine in Wisconsin and ensure the responsible stewardship of our great resources. Again, thank you for your time today

I'm happy to answer any questions that you may have.



MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks, and Outdoor Recreation

FROM: Collin Driscoll, Government Affairs Associate

DATE: June 11, 2025

SUBJECT: Support of Assembly Bill 315

Chairman Mursau and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide feedback on Assembly Bill 315, a bill that would reauthorize the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program with thoughtful changes that help the program adapt to the future needs of Wisconsin.

To start, I would like to say that the Wisconsin Counties Association has no major concerns regarding this bill. In fact, we're in support of it. I can't speak for anyone else in this room, but I'm fairly confident that the reason most of us showed up today is to find a path forward that reauthorizes the Stewardship Program with a solution that everyone is comfortable with. That solution will require compromise from legislators, Governor Evers, and stakeholders. At the end of the day, there are realistically only two possible outcomes: we work together to recognize the positives with an understanding that compromise doesn't bring you everything you want; or, the program ends in its entirety. We at the Wisconsin Counties Association have chosen to take the first option – compromise.

As with any bill that works its way through the legislative process, there is always room for improvement. One suggestion we have to make the bill better than it already is, would be more local approval. In the shared revenue package that was passed last session, there was a provision that required all parcels north of Highway 8 to get local approval from the municipal and county boards in order to be eligible for a stewardship grant. This has been extremely successful. In fact, it was so successful that the Joint Finance Committee, prior to the court decision that removed the passive review process, had been receiving local approval resolutions for parcels all around the state – frankly because it's good practice. Prior to that court decision, locals who felt they were left out of the process, had

the ability to petition finance members to help slow things down in an effort to have much needed conversations about the future of land within their communities. Bringing statewide local approval into this bill would allow locals the opportunity to be a part of the process from the beginning – which I think is a win for everyone.

In closing, we want to thank Representative Kurtz and Senator Testin for bringing this bill forward and starting the conversation. The bill in front of us today has many beneficial components for all the impacted stakeholders and we can't let perfect get in the way of good.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on AB 315. We look forward to future deliberation on this bill, and I'm more than happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.



wicouncil.tu.org

RE: Wisconsin TU support for AB 315 - Knowles Nelson Stewardship

Members of the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks, & Outdoor Recreation:

My name is Mike Kuhr. I live in Monona, WI and I am a volunteer leader for the Wisconsin Council of Trout Unlimited. Trout Unlimited is our Nation's leading cold water conservation organization. Here in Wisconsin, we're home to over 6,500 members and 21 local chapters dedicated to ensuring future generations' access to cold, clean, fishable water. In a typical year, WITU and its Chapters report over 50,000 volunteer hours, working on conservation projects, youth education and outreach events, and operating Service Partnership programs to support veterans and first responders in our communities.

I'm here to express our organization's support for AB 315, which would extend the Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program for another 4 years and make important updates to the Program. We would like to thank Representative Kurtz, Senator Testin, and the other co-sponsors of AB 315 for their leadership and willingness to ensure that Wisconsin's iconic public lands initiative continues.

Our members value the recreational opportunities that Wisconsin's woods and waters provide. We understand that healthy watersheds are vital to these pursuits and to our local communities. Since 1989, the Stewardship Program has been preserving valuable natural areas, protecting water quality and fisheries, and expanding opportunities for outdoor recreation. Wisconsin's outdoor recreation economy has grown to over 11 billion dollars annually with these investments.

While our organization is supportive of the reauthorization of the Stewardship Program and most of the proposed changes, there are a few areas where we feel some additional clarification could make this a better bill.

The proposed bill would allow the DNR to provide grants to NCOs to develop, manage, preserve, restore, and maintain wildlife habitat on public lands to benefit game species and other wildlife. Historically, the term wildlife has included fish. Since the Program is administered by the DNR, and they have separate Divisions for Fisheries and Wildlife, we feel it would be appropriate for the bill language in this section to include "fish and wildlife habitat". This language would make it clear that fish habitat projects on publicly accessible lands would also be eligible to apply for these wildlife grants.

Also, we request clarity regarding the new Major Land Acquisition Program, which according to the bill language kicks in when a land acquisition project or grant exceeds \$1 million dollars. It's not clear if NCO projects, which require a 50% match, cross this threshold when the total project costs exceed \$1 million OR when the Stewardship grant for which they apply exceeds \$1 million.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the authors for their leadership on the Stewardship Program and urge the Committee to consider an amendment to the bill to address the concerns raised today. We look forward to continuing our work with the Legislature and the Governor's Office to ensure a robust future for the Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program and the outdoor recreation economy that it supports here in Wisconsin.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to public service.

Mike Kuhr

Wisconsin Council of Trout Unlimited, State Council Advocacy Chair
mikek.trout@yahoo.com (414) 588-4281

The Wisconsin Council of Trout Unlimited ("WITU") is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization which consists of approximately 6,500 volunteer members in 21 chapters in Wisconsin working to ensure that future generations have access to cold, clean, fishable water. In a typical year, WITU and its Chapters report over 50,000 volunteer hours, working on conservation projects, education and outreach events, and operating Service Partnership programs to support veterans and first responders.



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June 11th, 2025

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RE: Wisconsin Wildlife Federation Testimony, Assembly Bill 315

Hello members of the Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation,

My name is Cody Kamrowski, executive director of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation (WWF), we represent over 200 affiliated clubs, organizations and associations throughout the State of Wisconsin. I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony surrounding Assembly Bill 315 for the reauthorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. We support this legislation, but we would like to see a few changes to the legislation to ensure it is as beneficial as it can be for wildlife, wild places and most importantly, the citizens of our great state.

We want to thank Representative Kurtz and Senator Testin for their leadership to reauthorize and provide updates to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. This bill is a testament to collaboration and public engagement.

We as an organization advocate for the sustainable future of hunting, fishing, trapping and outdoor recreation. The single most important component for Wisconsinites to engage in these activities is access and opportunity. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has been instrumental in providing that for more than 30 years.

Again, this proposed legislation is a step in the right direction and will allow for needed improvements to our existing public lands and future acquired acres. We welcome conversations with legislators to discuss changes to the legislation surrounding prioritization language of development VS acquisition as well as the financial allotments of the programs, bonding and segregated accounts.

Included in my testimony is a policy resolution that was passed this week by our Forestry Parks and Recreation committee for your reference and review.

I want to thank you for the time and opportunity to testify today,

Cody Kamrowski
Executive Director
Wisconsin Wildlife Federation

Wisconsin Wildlife Federation



Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Funding for DNR Land Acquisitions

- Whereas, The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources manages numerous public recreational properties and protected wildlife habitat parcels throughout the state of Wisconsin.
- Whereas, Land acquisitions within the state's most popular public destinations remain incomplete with numerous high profile properties improving habitat management and public access still being targeting for potential acquisition.
- Whereas, Funding for land acquisition through the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program was lowered from \$9M to \$5M during the last re-authorization. Ice Age Trail acquisitions was afforded an additional \$1M for trail acquisitions.
- Whereas, The \$5M allocation for DNR acquisition, funded entirely by DNR forestry cash and not public bonded monies, was further limited in use by only allowing 33% of that funding to be used for fee acquisitions, while the remaining 66% was allocated strictly for easement purchases. This equates to \$1.66M to be used for DNR fee purchases.
- Whereas, The limited allocation of \$1.66M in fee acquisitions over the past few years has created such limited funding, that numerous high profile public access parcels were not considered viable for purchase by the DNR.
- Whereas, It is our belief the DNR has been focusing on land acquisitions nearer to populations centers in the state of Wisconsin. This includes recent SE WI acquisitions at Princes Point, Devils Lake, Kenosha Dunes, Bong Recreational area, Big Muskego Lake Wildlife area and extended bike trails in support of the White River State trail. Acquisitions of these parcels in heavily populated parts of the state tend to be more expensive and are at

greater risk for development. Without increased Knowles-Nelson funding available, acquisition opportunities within approved acquisition boundaries in SE Wisconsin if developed will never be available again for state purchase.

Whereas,

Each DNR property has an acquisition project boundary as approved through the master plan process approved by the Natural Resources Board (NRB), limiting the ability to purchase outside of that boundary without NRB approval. This restriction places reasonable limits on DNR's ability to acquire lands outside of preferred acquisition boundaries.

Whereas,

The Department of Natural Resources has over \$1 billion dollars in backlogs for infrastructure, maintenance and upkeep and it is recognized that infrastructure and management needs exist across state-owned lands, in particular north of highway 64.

Therefore, Be It Resolved,

Highway 64 to serve as the dividing North/South emphasis line. Properties north of highway 64, land development and improvements are to be prioritized over land acquisition. South of highway 64, land acquisitions utilizing Knowles-Nelson funding are to be prioritized over land development. Exceptions to these prioritization categories could be made if exigent circumstances present themselves and swift action is needed.

Therefore, Be It Further Resolved, That the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, at its June 9th, Forestry, Parks and Recreation Committee Meeting moved that Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Funding for DNR land acquisition return to the \$9M annual allocation previously approved prior to the last reauthorization, and that the restriction that these funds to be used 33% fee and 66% easement be removed. We further resolve that an additional \$1M annually be allocated for use to acquire land for the Ice Age Trail.

**Oral Testimony to the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation
Regarding the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program
June 11, 2025**

Chairman Mursau and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I'm here representing the perspective of someone actively involved with Friends groups that support Wisconsin's State Parks — volunteers who, year after year, work alongside the DNR to enhance public lands and connect people to the outdoors.

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program plays a vital role in supporting that work. While many people know the program for its land acquisition efforts, there's another part that deserves just as much recognition — the annual \$500,000 set aside for grants to Friends groups and nonprofit conservation organizations. This portion of the program strengthens the on-the-ground work being done every day in our parks and public lands.

One example is the **incentive grant program** administered by the **Friends of Wisconsin State Parks (FWSP)**, which provides small but powerful funding to local Friends chapters at individual properties. These grants support interpretive signage, trail building materials, accessibility improvements, and restoration projects.

But one of the most impactful uses of these funds — and one I hope the committee especially takes note of — is the support they provide for **Limited Term Employment (LTE) Naturalist positions and Naturalist-led programming**. These seasonal educators help visitors, school

groups, and families engage with the natural world, often serving as the public's first point of connection to conservation.

This year, out of the 39 approved grant applications, 31 Naturalist programs and LTE wages across the state are being supported through incentive grants supplied by FWSP. These roles not only enhance the visitor experience but also provide early career pathways for future conservation professionals — and without this funding, particularly from the Knowles Nelson Program, many of these positions would not be possible.

I share this not as a request, but as an insight — into how the Stewardship Program amplifies the efforts of volunteers, educators, and communities working in partnership with the state. It's an investment that makes our parks more welcoming, our trails more accessible, and our programs more meaningful.

With this year marking the 125th anniversary of the Wisconsin State Park System, let us not merely preserve what has been built — let us build upon it. Let us empower those who steward our shared lands and give Friends groups the tools they need to meet today's challenges and tomorrow's possibilities.

Thank you for your time, and for your ongoing support of the people and partnerships that protect Wisconsin's public lands.

Respectfully Submitted,

Seth Taft



GROUNDSWELL CONSERVANCY

June 11, 2025

Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

Testimony on Assembly Bill 315

Chair Mursau and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Tony Abate. I work as Conservation Director at Groundswell Conservancy. We are a land trust that works throughout south-central Wisconsin to conserve farmland, wetlands, natural areas, and recreational lands. Groundswell has been privileged to receive many Knowles-Nelson grants and we also support our local government partners in their Knowles-Nelson applications.

First, let me offer my thanks to the bill authors and the committee members for your commitment to Knowles-Nelson and to Wisconsin's natural resources. Farmland protection, natural areas conservation, and outdoor recreation opportunities in Wisconsin have all advanced thanks to the state's investment in Knowles-Nelson. We appreciate your hard work to find a continued path forward for the Stewardship Program.

At Groundswell, we receive many more requests from landowners looking to conserve their land than we have the capacity to pursue. The projects we bring to the DNR for Knowles-Nelson funding are carefully vetted and represent work we are ready to invest in for the long-term.

We appreciate that the bill includes stable funding for the land trust community, a four-year authorization that provides us with some time to plan future projects, and the opportunity to direct Knowles-Nelson investments to land management work.

I respectfully request that the committee consider two changes to the proposed legislation.

First, we would like for DNR to have the flexibility to award grants for either land acquisition or land management based on the merits of the project rather than directing the agency to prioritize land management.

We recognize that there is tremendous pressure for hunting, fishing, hiking and other outdoor recreation opportunities close to where people live. We would hate to miss out on an opportunity to provide that access because of a lack of funding.

For example, in February of this year, we added 42 acres to the Lake Mills Wildlife Area in Jefferson County. This critical acquisition provides hunting and fishing access to the east side

of the wildlife area where it didn't previously exist. Opportunities to provide such access sometimes only come once in a generation.

Second, we are concerned with the funding threshold and the logistics of the proposed major land acquisition program.

Real estate near population centers is expensive and we often compete with non-conservation buyers to secure farmland or recreational lands. Of the current 16 projects in our pipeline, four of those are multimillion dollar acquisitions – and all four of those have some portion of *Knowles-Nelson funding awarded or planned for application. Perhaps this special process* should be reserved for grant awards closer to \$5 million rather than \$1 million.

The timelines proposed in the legislation may also be challenging. It appears that the new major land acquisition program would require us to submit project details, including lining up other funding sources, in time for DNR to bring the project to the legislature in January. That would likely mean providing all those details to DNR months before the January deadline.

It does not appear that the legislation provides any certainty as to when, or if, the legislature would act on the proposals brought forth by DNR. For Groundswell, that would be particularly challenging because we are always balancing multiple funding deadlines, philanthropic giving campaigns, and landowners who may not have the financial resources or patience to tolerate months or years of uncertainty.

Land acquisition is already a lengthy process for families looking to work with us to protect their land or add to other local public lands. After a landowner reaches out to us, we first evaluate the conservation significance of the property. If it meets our criteria, we then order an appraisal. If that appraisal is satisfactory, we extend a purchase agreement and begin a due diligence process. This includes property title review, an environmental site assessment, securing any needed surveys, and of course raising the funding for the project. Each of these activities takes time, and once that package is ready for acquisition, I can only imagine how much it could test a family's patience to work through a legislative process of indeterminate length.

Thank you for your time today. We value your commitment to Knowles-Nelson and to Wisconsin. We would welcome the opportunity to work with you as you craft a renewed Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Tony Abate, Conservation Director

Groundswell Conservancy

Tony@groundswellconservancy.org



June 11, 2025

Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

Testimony on Assembly Bill 315

Chair Mursau and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Charles Carlin, Director of Strategic Initiatives for Gathering Waters: Wisconsin's Alliance for Land Trusts. We represent 40 nonprofit conservation organizations across Wisconsin, many of whom utilize the nonprofit conservation organization and local assistance subprograms of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

Gathering Waters is neutral on Assembly Bill 315. We appreciate the dedication of the bill authors and co-sponsors to finding a bipartisan solution to reauthorize Knowles-Nelson. This bill charts a path for core elements of the program to thrive, and we appreciate the opportunity to comment on ways to strengthen this important legislation.

AB 315 provides a strong foundation for Wisconsin's conservation future. In particular, we applaud that:

- **Funding levels for many subprograms are stable**, which will allow land trusts to move forward with projects they have been planning and developing for years.
- **A four-year authorization** provides certainty and predictability for complex conservation projects that often require years of relationship building and piecing together multiple funding sources.
- **Habitat management grants** for NCOs are a welcome addition to the program. This is a critical need and we appreciate the investment in caring for lands that our members have promised to steward responsibly.

While we support the bill's overall framework, we respectfully suggest two targeted improvements as well as clarifying some of the language in the bill.

First, the bill's directive to prioritize property development over land acquisition could inadvertently prohibit the DNR from awarding grants to worthy acquisition projects. The

program already receives more interest than it can fund and expanding into land management will certainly attract even more applications.

We suggest a simple fix: **Direct DNR to award grants to NCOs for either land acquisition or habitat management**, ensuring the most compelling projects receive funding.

Second, we appreciate legislators' concern with oversight, and we welcome discussion about how to provide effective and efficient oversight. Unfortunately, the current proposal lacks defined timelines, transparent evaluation processes, and mechanisms to require timely votes. Without these elements, worthy conservation projects could languish indefinitely.

We ask that any review process includes **binding timelines, transparent project evaluation, and timely votes** to ensure strong oversight while maintaining predictability for applicants.

Finally, we suggest working with the DNR to clarify the bill's language to ensure consistency with existing conservation law. For example, the proposed land management grants should reference **"publicly accessible lands" rather than "public lands"** to properly include land trust holdings that serve the public good but are not government-owned.

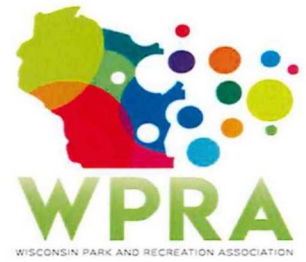
Gathering Waters and our member organizations are committed to working collaboratively with the members of this committee, the bill's authors, and other stakeholders to ensure this reauthorization affirms Wisconsin's commitment to our natural heritage.

Thank you for your consideration, and I welcome any questions.

Sincerely,

Charles Carlin, Director of Strategic Initiatives
Gathering Waters: Wisconsin's Alliance for Land Trusts

Charles@gatheringwaters.org



To: Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

From: Wisconsin Park & Recreation Association

Date: June 11, 2025

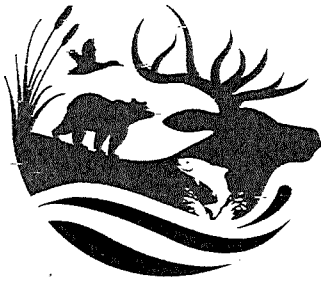
Re: Testimony in Support of AB 315

The Wisconsin Park and Recreation Association (WPRA) is pleased to express our support for AB 315, which reauthorizes the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. We are encouraged to see continued investment in Wisconsin's outdoor recreation future and deeply appreciate that the proposed funding levels for the Boating Aids and Local Units of Government (LUG) subprograms remain at current levels. WPRA has long supported enhanced investment in the LUG subprogram, as proposed in the Governor's budget. At the same time, we recognize that AB 315 reflects a thoughtful and practical path forward that can garner broad legislative support.

The LUG subprogram is a cost-effective, community-centered partnership that empowers municipalities, towns, and counties parks to improve and expand outdoor recreation infrastructure. By providing 50 percent matching grant funds, the program ensures that local communities are directly invested in the success of their projects, amplifying the impact of state resources and maximizing taxpayer value.

We also recognize the provision requiring 20 percent of the 50 percent match to come from local sources. While local governments continue to face fiscal challenges, this provision strikes a fair compromise that maintains accountability and is workable for local governments.

WPRA sincerely thanks Representative Kurtz and Senator Testin for their leadership in authoring AB 315. Reauthorizing the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program is a meaningful step toward preserving Wisconsin's outdoor legacy, supporting rural and urban communities alike, and ensuring that future generations can enjoy the natural resources that make our state special.



SPORTING COALITION for STEWARDSHIP

Ducks Unlimited • Pheasant Forever & Quail Forever • National Wild Turkey Federation •
Wisconsin Waterfowl Association • Safari Club International • Delta Waterfowl • Wisconsin Trappers Association •
Wisconsin Trout Unlimited • Wisconsin-Wildlife Federation • Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation •
Audubon Great Lakes • Ruffed Grouse Society / American Woodcock Society • Boone and Crockett Club

To: Members, Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

Dt: June 11, 2025

Re: AB 315 – Proposed Changes to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program

The Sporting Coalition for Stewardship is a group of more than a dozen major conservation organizations representing hunters, anglers, and trappers from across Wisconsin. Our members are actively engaged in Wisconsin's rich sporting heritage - hunting, fishing and trapping on our public lands and providing time and resources to fuel conservation efforts across the state.

Continuing that rich sporting heritage is extremely important to us. We need to ensure that we continue to provide access and opportunities to the hundreds of thousands of sportsmen and women who take advantage of our public lands each year. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has been instrumental in providing more access and opportunities for our hunters, anglers and trappers in Wisconsin, and for the last year, our coalition has been working to ensure that Wisconsin's premier land conservation program will continue.

That is why we applaud the work done by Representative Tony Kurtz and Senator Pat Testin to provide updates to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program and support the framework laid out in AB 315.

This proposed legislation will allow much needed improvements to be made to our existing public lands, while also ensuring that a useable program will continue with input from both the legislative and executive branches.

For more than thirty years, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has helped provide more access and opportunities for Wisconsin's hunters, anglers, and trappers, and we are extremely pleased that members of the legislature are working to ensure that this continues.