



STRATEGIC PLAN
2011-2014

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2011-2014 Strategic Plan

OUR INSPIRATION

Wisconsin's landscapes – miles of beach, soaring bluffs, acres of ancient forest – were shaped by the world's largest freshwater ecosystem, the mighty Mississippi and the last great glacial retreat. These lands inspired some of the country's conservation giants, including Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Gaylord Nelson, and Lorrie Otto. Energized by powerful geology, the natural beauty of our state and our inherited legacy of conservation leadership, Gathering Waters Conservancy advances Wisconsin's preeminent tradition of land conservation and stewardship and promotes a land ethic among its constituencies.

OUR MISSION

Gathering Waters Conservancy helps land trusts, landowners and communities protect the places that make Wisconsin special. Our goal is to increase the amount of protected land in the state through private voluntary action.

HOW WE WORK

We accomplish our mission by providing resources and facilitating partnerships within and outside the traditional conservation community to strengthen Wisconsin's land trusts. Our advocacy efforts bring about public and private support for conservation, bipartisan support for conservation legislation, and promote private, voluntary conservation action.

Gathering Waters was founded to support the work of Wisconsin's land trusts. We have continually expanded the definition of "land trust service center" to keep pace with the remarkable growth and success of Wisconsin's private land conservation movement. We provide direct technical assistance to non-profit land trusts. We are non-partisan, solution-oriented advocates for public policies supporting land conservation. We use our statewide voice to raise the profile of Wisconsin land trusts, promote a statewide land ethic, and inspire broad public support for land conservation. And we strive to incorporate best practices into every facet of our work.

OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Since Gathering Waters began its work in Wisconsin, the number of non-profit organizations permanently protecting land has increased from 12 to over 50. Boasting more than 45,000 members statewide, these land trusts have permanently protected well over 200,000 acres of Wisconsin's natural heritage. Gathering Waters has successfully advocated for funding increases for the state's renowned land conservation program, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, and for the passage of the Working Lands Initiative. GWC has bolstered the visibility and effectiveness of conservation efforts by facilitating collaborations among land trusts and regional leaders around the state. We have introduced land trusts and their successes to statewide media.

We maintain close contact with elected officials and state and federal agencies to keep conservation programs working for Wisconsin. In less than two decades, Gathering Waters Conservancy has become a respected voice for private land conservation in the state and has earned its reputation as the premier land trust service center in the nation.

OUR VISION: A STRONG WISCONSIN LAND ETHIC

We envision a strong and strategic land trust community supported and celebrated by a Wisconsin citizenry that personifies the land ethic championed by Aldo Leopold. One of Wisconsin's conservation giants, Leopold believed that "[w]hen we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." We understand that the advancement of our mission and the success of the land trust community are inextricably linked to the advancement of a strong land ethic and the consciousness it cultivates.

OUR PLAN

Land trusts are the principal agents for private land protection in the state. Gathering Waters will continue to invest in the capacity and excellence of Wisconsin's land trusts. The pace of land protection has leapt exponentially in recent years. We believe it will accelerate further as land trusts grow, engage in partnerships with agencies and community leaders, and promote themselves as critical community resources. We will work to see Wisconsin's community of land trusts well-funded, celebrated and supported in their communities, and doing strategic, effective and lasting conservation work. Together, this community of land trusts will help Wisconsin progress toward a million acres of land permanently protected through private landowners' voluntary conservation actions. But not just any million acres – a million acres of ecologically, economically and culturally significant lands voluntarily protected by citizens who celebrate the value of conservation to their communities and to our state.

Outreach

In particular, we will utilize our expanding outreach toolbox to increase individual and community support for land conservation and promote a statewide land ethic. We believe that strong relationships between land trusts and local governments and other community institutions will yield additional acres protected beyond what land trusts can achieve working one-by-one with individual private landowners.

Direct Services to Land Trusts

To ensure conservation permanence, we're launching LEAP, a program that provides focused and enhanced resources to land trusts and encourages strategic, legally-sound land protection.

Public Policy Advocacy

We have an ambitious public policy agenda, as some of the best, value-added services we can deliver to Wisconsin land trusts are state and federal programs that will direct significant funds to land protection. We will continue to build bi-partisan support for the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program and the Working Lands Initiative and monitor the horizon for additional opportunities to promote policies that benefit voluntary, private land conservation.

Gathering Waters Conservancy's Capacity

To guarantee our success in all these efforts, Gathering Waters will invest in our own capacity—maintaining ample operational funding and recruiting and retaining extraordinary expertise and leadership. Everything we do serves to help people protect Wisconsin's special places, and we believe that the protection of Wisconsin's most special places is possible under the leadership of a strong, supported, and strategic land trust community.

DIRECT SERVICES TO LAND TRUSTS

Gathering Waters Conservancy engages with land trusts throughout the state towards achieving the vision of having sustainable land trusts working in all parts of Wisconsin as the pace of private land conservation continues to increase.

How We Work

Gathering Waters provides land trust services in three related ways. We provide consultation to keep land trusts running smoothly, offer training and resources to help increase the pace and sustainability of their work, and scout for opportunities and obstacles on the road ahead.

Since its founding, Gathering Waters has offered operational expertise and information to Wisconsin land trusts. From strategic consulting to board orientation, from project-specific technical advice to agency-relations assistance, Gathering Waters provides staff time and expertise to aid Wisconsin land trusts. We provide opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, educate the pool of volunteer board members and professionals who work with land trusts, and help Wisconsin land trusts prepare for accreditation. We do all of this at little or no cost to the land trusts.

As the size and sophistication of Wisconsin's land trust community grows, we continue to research and track new conservation tools and foster organizational development. Increasingly, we represent land trust interests to state and federal agencies to develop and refine funding programs. We facilitate partnerships between local land trusts, and with conservation and civic leaders in their areas to help them identify new opportunities for creative, collaborative approaches to conservation.

Finally, working statewide to represent the interests of 50-plus land trusts, we continuously seek new opportunities to support their work to protect Wisconsin's natural heritage for future generations. If there are obstacles ahead – trends in public policy, the media or legal realms likely to challenge conservation success – we help Wisconsin's land trusts prepare to shift course or take action.

Our Three Year Goals & Strategic Actions

Under the leadership of Gathering Waters Conservancy board members serving on the Land Trust Council:

1. Gathering Waters Conservancy will provide the state's maturing land trust community with the training and resources they need to achieve excellence.

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Launch Wisconsin's Land Trust Excellence and Advancement Program (LEAP), meeting the following goals defined in the plan approved by the board:
 - i. Offer customized services to 12 land trusts to significantly enhance their performance and conservation impact.
 - ii. Prepare four to six land trusts for their successful application to the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

- iii. Continue to offer universal technical assistance services to land trusts statewide, including the training of at least 200 land trust professionals and board members on a variety of technical and organizational management topics.
 - iv. Foster a stronger, more cohesive land trust community in Wisconsin and provide long-term peer learning opportunities.
 - v. Ensure that strategic conservation planning is integral to each LEAP participant's land protection activities.
- b. When deemed necessary and appropriate, support land trusts' efforts to defend conservation easement agreements. [cross-referenced with public policy advocacy strategic actions]
 - c. Work to strengthen funding programs that benefit private land conservation. [cross-referenced with public policy advocacy strategic actions]
 - d. Evaluate fee for service options to maximize the benefits of our services to Wisconsin land trusts while maintaining judicious and resource-efficient annual budgets. [cross-reference with capacity strategic actions]
2. Gathering Waters Conservancy will promote landscape-level protection of regionally important conservation lands and waters through the establishment and facilitation of regional and/or resource-focused partnerships where appropriate (e.g. the Lake Michigan Shorelands Alliance).

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Continue to facilitate the Lake Michigan Shorelands Alliance.
 - b. Survey land trusts to determine regional and/or resource-focused opportunities to advance landscape-level protection and conduct opportunity assessments to illustrate where the establishment of partnerships would enhance these opportunities.
 - c. Evaluate Gathering Waters' role in developing partnerships to enhance and monitor conservation efforts throughout Wisconsin and build the capacities of individual land trusts through the recordkeeping, priority planning, analytical, and mapping powers of geographic information systems.
3. Gathering Waters Conservancy will work with Wisconsin's Land Trust Council to ensure that the needs of Wisconsin's land trust community are effectively represented in GWC's strategic and annual work plans and to create a community of land trust leaders representing the interests of Wisconsin's 50+ land trusts.

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. At a minimum, annually convene the Land Trust Council to discuss land trust needs and communicate the Council's recommendations to GWC's Board of Directors.

- b. Create a mechanism for the Land Trust Council’s participation in GWC’s strategic and annual planning.
- 4. Gathering Waters Conservancy will foster and uphold high standards for Wisconsin’s land trust community and membership in GWC. [cross-referenced with direct services to land trusts strategic action 1a]

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Develop membership standards that speak to the integrity and value of Wisconsin’s land trust community and with which GWC member organizations must comply.
 - b. Evaluate membership category options to accommodate the range of land trust sizes and scope across Wisconsin.
- 5. Gathering Waters Conservancy will develop a system of support and intervention for at-risk land trusts.

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Prepare case study reports of our work with land trusts to clarify lessons learned and to make available as a model for others.
 - b. Create parameters to determine when, and to what extent, Gathering Waters offers assistance to struggling land trusts.
 - c. Evaluate the cost and feasibility of creating a “rescue endowment” to fund our work supporting at-risk land trusts.

PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY

Gathering Waters Conservancy advocates for public policies that benefit and encourage private land conservation in Wisconsin.

How We Work

Gathering Waters uses its unique leadership position in Wisconsin's conservation community to build broad, non-partisan support for public policies that provide land trusts, landowners and other partners with the resources and tools to accomplish strategic and lasting private land conservation for the citizens of Wisconsin. We recognize that our leadership is firmly rooted in the diverse and vibrant grassroots network of Wisconsin's 50+ land trusts and the support of conservation-minded citizens across the political spectrum.

Gathering Waters Conservancy strives to make the voices of individuals and the land trust community heard by state and federal lawmakers and among government agencies. We continuously seek new opportunities for public policies to encourage the work of land trusts and support efforts to protect Wisconsin's natural heritage for future generations.

Our Three Year Goals & Strategic Actions

Under the leadership of the Gathering Waters Conservancy board members serving on the policy committee:

1. Federal, state, and local policies will provide expanded opportunities for land trust participation in public conservation programs, increased funding and other financial incentives for private land conservation, and improved durability of conservation tools.

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Promote the growth of the grants portion of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund.
- b. Advocate for maximum practicable funding of the Stewardship Fund.
- c. Continue to support the Working Lands Initiative, and advocate for increased funding of the Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) program.
- d. Improve the durability of conservation easements in Wisconsin through legislation and education of land trusts and their advisors. [cross-referenced with direct services to land trusts strategic actions]
- e. Work with the Land Trust Alliance to advocate for a permanent enhanced federal tax incentive for the donation of conservation easements.

2. Federal, state, and local agencies will implement public policies to allow for participation and accessibility by land trusts in conservation funding programs.

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Work with DNR staff and the Natural Resources Board to ensure that the Stewardship Fund grants process remains efficient, flexible and predictable.

- b. Work with DATCP staff on the implementation of the Working Lands Initiative, specifically the statewide PACE program, to ensure that the program remains accessible to land trusts.
- c. Advocate for adequate staffing of the Stewardship Fund grants program at DNR.
- d. Work with federal agency officials to ensure that the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) provides opportunities for land trust participation and prioritizes land acquisition.
- e. Work with representatives from NRCS to ensure that the Farm and Ranchland Protection (FRPP) program remains accessible to land trusts.
- f. Work with agency officials at the state and federal level to explore how Clean Water Act funding could be used for land conservation work in Wisconsin.

3. Gathering Waters Conservancy will evaluate the opportunities and risks related to emerging legislative and administrative public policy issues.

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Track issues related to global warming legislation at the state and federal levels.
- b. Track the progress of any proposed constitutional amendment to increase conservation funding in Wisconsin.
- c. Track the progress of the federal America's Great Outdoors Initiative and evaluate where opportunities may exist for Wisconsin's land trusts.
- d. In consultation with the policy committee, identify and track other emerging issues that may affect land trusts.

4. Gathering Waters Conservancy will develop and maintain broad coalitions and partnerships with organizations and individuals interested in private, voluntary land conservation and will cultivate strong relationships between land trusts and key legislators, the Governor, and agency officials. [cross-referenced with outreach]

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Reach out to organizations that have historically supported the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, including hunting advocacy organizations, local government groups, silent sports advocates, etc.
- b. Explore new strategic alliances that could help bolster private, voluntary land conservation. [cross-referenced with outreach strategic actions]
- c. Build relationships with leadership in the Wisconsin legislature and look for opportunities to connect these elected officials with local land trusts.
- d. Develop relationships within the Governor's administration and leadership within key government agencies.

OUTREACH

Gathering Waters Conservancy works to help land trusts become well-known and valued community institutions. We aim to see land trusts strongly supported and sought out as conservation leaders. We promote Gathering Waters' value to land trusts and Wisconsin land conservation.

How We Work

Our outreach strives to promote a strong land conservation ethic. We understand that the advancement of this ethic and the consciousness it cultivates is inextricably linked to the growth and success of the land trust movement.

As Wisconsin's land trust community has grown in size and sophistication since GWC's founding, land trust service has necessarily expanded to mean more than direct consultation and technical assistance. We seek opportunities to champion the work of land trusts in order to connect them to necessary resources and ensure permanent land conservation. We cultivate a diverse and well-connected group of partners to enhance opportunities for private land conservation. We wield a statewide voice, and we will use that voice to herald the value of conservation and a vibrant land trust community to key audiences, including legislators, local community leaders, landowners, media, future conservation leaders, and potential donors.

We understand that effective communication is essential in all Gathering Waters' programs. The organization's success depends on how well and often we deliver compelling messages, information and knowledge to wisely selected, target audiences.

Our Three Year Goals & Strategic Actions

Under the leadership of GWC staff and an ad hoc outreach committee:

1. GWC will efficiently and effectively utilize a diverse outreach tool box to develop timely and compelling messages and to communicate our messages including, but not limited to, educational messages promoting private land conservation and a strong land ethic, to varied, target audiences, including media, funders, policy makers, land trust professionals and volunteers, strategic alliances, and citizens interested in protecting Wisconsin's special places.

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Review its existing outreach materials to ensure consistent messaging and revisit at six-month intervals the function of our suite of communications tools, including print material, web presence, outreach to media and face-to-face contacts, and consider modifications to assure that communications are serving GWC's strategic program goals.
- b. Retain an outreach point person to oversee message, pursue multiple communications opportunities, track successes, and coordinate staff training, familiarization and integration with the suite of communications tools we use.

- c. Pursue frequent opportunities with Wisconsin media to tell the story of how our programs and the land trusts we serve protect special places in Wisconsin.
 - d. Explore the need and utility for the creation of a permanent outreach committee.
 - e. Explore the possibility of partnering with other organizations to educate our varied audiences about private land conservation and a strong land ethic.
 - f. Review the format, length and depth of the print newsletter and its role relative to other communications tools to make sure we're maximizing its potential.
 - g. Use web analytics to test and improve the efficacy of our communications.
 - h. Biennially survey our membership and other key audiences as needed to develop a baseline to help measure the effectiveness of communications.
 - i. Explore new strategic alliances that could help bolster private, voluntary land conservation. [cross-referenced with public policy advocacy strategic actions]
2. Wisconsin land trusts and GWC supporters will know and value GWC's efforts and accomplishment and will reach out to us for needed services.

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Track and measure the success of our communications to land trusts.
- b. Continue to commit to personal face-to-face time with land trust leadership.
- c. Appropriately recognize donors for the contributions to conservation and to our accomplishments. [cross-referenced with capacity strategic actions]

GATHERING WATERS CONSERVANCY'S CAPACITY

Gathering Waters Conservancy maintains a sustainable, diverse, and flexible resource base to fuel the creativity, pace and agility with which we pursue our mission.

How We Work

The implications of Gathering Waters Conservancy's mission are multifaceted, and we work in a dynamic and evolving environment. Gathering Waters is firmly committed to maintaining a strong resource base of diverse and predictable dollars, tools, expertise, and leadership from which we can draw to ensure our ability to assist Wisconsin land trusts, achieve our long-term vision and respond to immediate opportunities.

Gathering Waters pursues annual growth of our membership and major donor bases. Our members are the backbone of our organization; we strive to acknowledge them accordingly. We personalize membership cultivation and offer creative opportunities for members to be involved in our organization. We also offer planned giving opportunities to supporters interested in leaving a conservation legacy.

We understand that grants are critical to our program success as well, so we invest in relationship-building with local and regional foundations and the business community. Through printed material, events, and other outreach efforts, we continue to raise the profile of Gathering Waters Conservancy among potential donors, land trusts and civic and political leaders and promote our organization as an essential partner to anyone interested in supporting land conservation in Wisconsin.

Gathering Waters is determined to maintain a flexible, supportive and fun working environment that inspires dedicated, expert staff. We recruit and retain extraordinary talent. We provide our staff the tools they need to thrive in their positions including professional development opportunities that forward both individual and organizational ambitions.

Gathering Waters works to attract and develop well-connected, excellent leadership. Our board of directors is thoughtfully and strategically recruited, oriented to board service and given meaningful opportunities to carry out their commitment. We take purposeful steps to expand our circle of close friends and advisors.

Our Three Year Goals & Strategic Actions

1. Gathering Waters Conservancy will secure ample resources to carry out annual programmatic goals for direct services to land trusts, public policy advocacy, and outreach.

In pursuit of this goal, under the leadership of the development committee, GWC will:

- a. Organize a successful LEAP Campaign, meeting the goals defined in the campaign plan approved by the board.
- b. Grow our membership by 50% and maintain a 66% annual membership retention rate.
- c. Strengthen relationships with our membership to grow the Land Legacy Society by 25%, increasing our proportion of unrestricted support.

- d. Maintain current levels of marketing of the Sustainers Circle. (e.g. Publish periodic planned giving features in Crosscurrents, maintain a planned giving page on our website, etc.)
 - e. Continue to pursue opportunities to cooperatively fundraise with land trusts, including the organization of a minimum of three co-hosted events per year and the drafting of a GWC/LT cooperative fundraising policy.
 - f. Maintain existing restricted funding for our programs and projects and grow grants support by 10% by building and strengthening relationships with private foundations and government agencies.
 - g. Continue to build relationships with corporate donors and increase corporate contributions by 15%.
 - h. Create meaningful and strategic opportunities to engage and recognize funders beyond their annual solicitation.
 - i. Under the leadership of the finance committee, invest our funders' contributions wisely and adhere to operating budgets that maintain unrestricted reserves equaling roughly 70% of the annual operating costs of the organization.
 - j. Evaluate fee for service options to maximize the benefits of our services to Wisconsin land trusts while maintaining judicious and resource-efficient annual budgets. [cross-reference with direct services to land trusts strategic actions]
 - k. Appropriately recognize donors for the contributions to conservation and to our accomplishments. [cross-referenced with outreach strategic actions]
2. Gathering Waters Conservancy will recruit and retain knowledgeable and engaged board members who reflect the diversity of constituencies across Wisconsin and who are committed to providing leadership in pursuit of our mission.

In pursuit of this goal, GWC will:

- a. Charge the executive committee with creating and maintaining biennial leadership succession plans.
 - b. Recruit committed, well-connected, and strong leaders to fulfill the board composition goals defined by the governance committee.
3. Gathering Waters Conservancy will provide board members and advisors with a variety of engagement opportunities and offer an active and effective slate of committees on which to serve.

In pursuit of this goal, under the leadership of the governance committee, GWC will:

- a. Review the organization's committee structure and make necessary composition changes to ensure well-rounded and appropriate support of our programs.
- b. Develop a plan to continue to engage former board members.

- c. Work with individual board members to help them find their niche, define their board service goals, and enhance their overall board experience.
 - d. Review the role of the advisory council, including the land trust council, and make necessary changes to enhance the council's contribution to the advancement of our mission.
4. Gathering Waters Conservancy will maintain a driven, talented staff, as well as cutting edge technology and infrastructure to operate efficiently and effectively to meet the changing needs of GWC and the Wisconsin land trust community.

In pursuit of this goal, under the leadership of the executive committee, GWC will:

- a. Hire the best and the brightest – from interns to directors, foster their professional development, maintain the standard for competitive compensation in our field, and prioritize opportunities to promote from within.
- b. Maintain a productive work environment by nurturing a flexible, supportive, creative and fun atmosphere through semi-annual fun days, lunch bunch, “good things,” etc.
- c. Review and invest in technology and infrastructure needs to meet the industry standard and ensure the staff's unfettered ability to successfully fulfill their responsibilities.
- d. Develop a staff succession plan, including an evaluation of staff roles and responsibilities and cross-training needs per the parameters of the strategic plan.
- e. Formalize and document GWC operations and systems.