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State's Land Conservation Groups Alarmed by Budget Committee Vote

Joint Finance Committee votes to require state's land conservation program to purchase land the state already owns

The Nature Conservancy, Wisconsin's largest land trust, and Gathering Waters Conservancy, representing community land trusts from around the state, expressed surprise and disappointment a day after the Legislature's budget committee took a vote that could drastically slow, or bring to a halt, the state's nationally renowned land conservation program, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund.

"If signed into law, this proposal could tie up Stewardship Fund dollars for years, in essence preventing the purchase and conservation of thousands of acres of public recreation lands and wildlife habitat," said Mary Jean Huston, State Director of The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin. "If there is one government program that enjoys overwhelming bipartisan public support across the state, it is the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund."

Under the proposal, passed Thursday on a 10-6 vote, the State's Department of Natural Resources would be required to purchase over 75,000 acres of land that the state already owns. Using Stewardship dollars, one state agency, the DNR, would be required to purchase all the land currently owned by the Board of Commissioners of Public Land (BCPL), another state agency.

Already open for public access, BCPL lands are currently managed for timber production, outdoor recreation and habitat protection.

Now in its 15th year, the Stewardship Fund has leveraged millions of private and federal dollars to conserve and protect over 330,000 acres in 71 Wisconsin counties. The program expands parkland, increases opportunities for hunters and fishers, and protects habitat for scores of endangered and threatened plants and animals.

"The Stewardship Fund is vital for the protection of outdoor recreation areas in the communities in which we work and play," says Althea Dotzour, Gathering Waters Conservancy's Outreach and Policy Coordinator. "Wisconsin's local land trusts work hand-in-hand with the DNR to ensure that we all have access to scenic and diverse lands for the future. This proposal ties the

hands of the DNR by requiring them to purchase lands already owned and managed by the state and would be a disservice to Wisconsin taxpayers.”

“If Stewardship dollars are restricted to the purchase of state owned land, our state will miss out on important opportunities to protect our priceless lakes, streams, forests and prairies,” concluded Huston.

The two organizations also thank the six Finance Committee legislators for their vote for the Stewardship Fund and against the proposal. Those legislators include Senators Russ Decker (D-Schofield), Lena Taylor (D-Milwaukee), Rob Cowles (R-Green Bay), Joe Leibham (R-Sheboygan) and Representatives Mark Pocan (D-Madison) and Pedro Colon (D-Milwaukee).

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