

July 1, 2007–June 30, 2008

# 2008

## annual report



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## One Million Acres.

That's what we at Gathering Waters Conservancy hope to see protected in the next decade: a million acres of economically, ecologically and culturally significant lands in which the beauty and health of Wisconsin are rooted.

One millions acres is a lot, but when we empower communities, land trusts, and landowners with the knowledge and tools to protect the places that make Wisconsin special, this goal is within reach. We are talking about lasting conservation through private, voluntary action. It's ambitious, and it's achievable.



Michael Strigel, Executive Director

## Why so ambitious?

In our recent fiscal year, Gathering Waters Conservancy revisited our own strategic plan, as we do every three years. We asked ourselves what long-term vision will the next three years of our work serve?

When Gathering Waters was founded, we were charged to deliver technical know-how to help build land trusts in the state. Almost 15 years later, that network of organizations is robust and busy. In nearly every community in Wisconsin, landowners can turn to an active land trust for help protecting important places. In the last twelve months...

**West Wisconsin Land Trust** celebrated its 20th birthday  
**Natural Heritage Land Trust** marked acre number 5,000  
**Mississippi Valley Conservancy** protected more than 3000 acres in 2007 alone...

There are more than 50 land trusts in the state, and they can all boast progress last year. If Gathering Waters' mission was only to see a vigorous land trust community working in Wisconsin, our job would be done.

But our mission is to help land trusts, landowners and communities protect the land most special to Wisconsin. Besides those successes, we all know places that matter to our families and our communities that we'd like our grandchildren to know, too.

The land trust community has grown past needing just technical advice. They are the land protection experts, and they deserve a champion. We can keep public policy working with them. We can introduce them to new resources. We can stay abreast of national trends and increasingly complicated models for land protection.

We are ambitious because we are excited by the momentum of Wisconsin land trusts. Our vision of a million protected acres honors the land trusts' potential. Their potential inspires us to aim high.

## What we mean when we say a million acres

A million acres. It's a rallying cry and a symbol more than a precise figure. A mosaic of agencies, organizations, programs and landowners already protects a rich portfolio of some of Wisconsin's most important lands. At Gathering Waters we work to support a movement that is focused on providing communities and landowners with land protection choices. The energy and power of this voluntary movement make it hard not to think big. Here's why:

*...“a million acres of economically, ecologically and culturally significant lands in which the beauty and health of Wisconsin are rooted.”*

### Wisconsin Land Trusts

In a few decades, a modest grassroots movement of neighbors passionate about the future of treasured lands surged to become more than 50 organizations permanently protecting over 200,000 acres. Imagine what Wisconsin land trusts can do with more money and expanded support. We imagine that every day.

We keep working to make land trusts stronger. Last year we delivered knowledge to land trusts on the phone, in person and through statewide, regional and national conferences. We began two regional initiatives to bolster land trusts' effectiveness by seeding collaborations among land trusts and other community institutions—municipalities, civic organizations and business leadership. We laid plans for expanding the profile of private land conservation in Wisconsin's media.

### The Stewardship Fund

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund has already helped set aside 500,000 acres of valuable natural and agricultural lands. You'll read in pages ahead about our Stewardship success last year and how we are continuing to invest in the future of the state's premiere land conservation program.

### Wisconsin's Working Lands

There are more than 77,000 family farms on 15.6 million acres in Wisconsin. We have 16 million acres of forest. We envision a state with public funding enabling voluntary efforts to safeguard the wealth we have in our working lands. Read on and you'll learn how we are preparing the ground for a statewide Purchase of Development Rights program.

### Unexplored Opportunities

National, even international attention is trained now on the vast resources of the Great Lakes. The economics of energy are accelerating agriculture into unexplored markets. Solutions to global warming are indelibly connected to the health of our lands. As the use of the lands that sustain us grows more complicated, the tools we use to steward them necessarily become more intricate as well. We're determined to equip Wisconsin's land trusts and landowners to harness these opportunities and more.

Symbolic or not, the moment the millionth acre deal is closed, we at Gathering Waters, and I suspect you, too, will celebrate and look ahead for the land conservation we all have yet to accomplish.





Milwaukee elementary school student discovering the insect residents of the Mequon Nature Preserve. Photo courtesy of Kate Redmond

*“Gathering Waters looks out for the big-picture issues (like Stewardship), and engages us strategically, so that we can concentrate on our local work but also participate in the broader issues that have a big impact on us.”*

Jim Welsh, Executive Director, Natural Heritage Land Trust

## In Fiscal Year 2008, Gathering Waters made land trusts stronger by:

**Providing free and low cost direct services.** Our staff met one-on-one with organizations across the state, delivering expertise, facilitating strategic planning and guiding organizational assessments for land trusts preparing for accreditation. We met with Green Lake Conservancy Foundation, Kinnickinnic River Land Trust, Glacial Lakes Conservancy, Natural Heritage Land Trust, Bayfield Regional Conservancy, the Drumlin Area Land Trust, and the Northwoods Land Trust. On the phone and through cyber-space we fielded questions and researched answers for many more.

### Spearheading regional collaborations

to raise the profile of land trusts and land conservation in regional economic planning. Working with the land trust members of the Lake Michigan Shorelands Alliance we laid the foundation for four Great Lake Gatherings: open forums this fall designed to seed partnerships among land trusts, corporate citizens and community leaders that will protect local conservation priorities. Elsewhere, in partnership with Clean Wisconsin and the Madison Community Foundation, we catalyzed the creation of a powerful coalition proposing long-term, coordinated solutions to problems facing the Yahara River watershed.



### Convening our annual statewide land trust retreat,

an unmatched peer-to-peer learning opportunity for land trust staff and board members.

**Educating** attorneys about conservation gifts in estate planning, land trusts about sound financial management practices and tax assessors about evaluating conservation easements. We presented to conferences of the EcoTourism Society and Associations of National Tree Farmers, Financial Planners, Woodland Owners and the Wisconsin Lakes Association about the valuable partners they have in land trusts.

### Introducing land trusts to local landowners.

Landowners called our office—more than one a week—asking about saving family lands. We delivered basic information about private land conservation and referred them to the land trusts working in their neighborhood.

**Shining a spotlight on conservation heroes** at our Conservation Leadership Awards Celebration. We also hosted tours of Stewardship-protected properties and featured land trust success and the Stewardship Fund in articles in *Wisconsin Trails*, *Wisconsin People and Ideas* and *Madison Originals* magazines.

### Advocating for public policy

that encourages lasting conservation: Gathering Waters ran a resoundingly successful campaign to see the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund reauthorized and increased by 40%. We’ve since trained our sights on protection of working lands.

**Last fall we announced a Wisconsin land conservation triumph.**

Through months of phone calls, letters and action alerts, Gathering Waters Conservancy and our partners, The Nature Conservancy and land trusts statewide, marshalled a surge of support from all corners of the state to see the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund reauthorized and increased in the state budget.

Despite some of the most contentious negotiations in Wisconsin's history, the Stewardship Fund rose above the fray to emerge a winner in a budget fraught with compromises and cuts.

The increased Stewardship Fund marks a victory for everyone who values Wisconsin's natural heritage. Gathering Waters' efforts revealed to lawmakers how deeply rooted support for land conservation is among their constituents. In one week, we helped generate 1,800 calls from citizens to legislators. Stewardship supporters wrote more than 100 articles, 18 editorials and dozens of opinion columns in newspapers across the state.

Stewardship's reauthorization also marks a watershed in Gathering Waters' history. We have long been advocates for public policies that encourage land conservation, and we've come to the Stewardship Fund's defense in the past. This campaign rallied the conservation convictions of Wisconsinites of all political stripes and cemented our

reputation as a non-partisan, solution-oriented advocate for Wisconsin's natural heritage. Gathering Waters and our partners were at the table in the eleventh hour in this budget fight. Our success guaranteed that we will be there again.

We are still championing private land conservation as the rule-making process for the new Stewardship Fund is underway. The legislature increased Stewardship's funding with a mandate that the DNR define rules to maximize public access on lands that Stewardship money helps protect. Gathering Waters and several land trust partners are on the committee informing DNR leadership: we're working to help make sure that land forever protected can be enjoyed in all the ways Wisconsin citizens use our great outdoors.

Our Stewardship success is paying dividends we didn't expect: Gathering Waters' stature in the policy arena has attracted national support for Wisconsin farmland preservation (as you'll read on the next page). Nationally, other land trust service centers are turning to Gathering Waters as a model for conservation advocacy. We at Gathering Waters are expanding our own understanding of what it means to be a land trust service center. In pursuit of our mission to help people protect Wisconsin's special places, we will wield the strong reputation we've earned at the capitol to keep land conservation woven into the fabric of Wisconsin public policies.



we help **people**  
**protect** the places  
 that make  
**Wisconsin** special



*Gathering Waters can deliver Wisconsin's powerful grassroots network of land conservation supporters and our respected, solution-oriented presence in the public arena.*

Two years ago a group of land use leaders, chaired by Secretary of Agriculture Rod Nilsestuen, announced a set of policy recommendations for the benefit of Wisconsin's working farms and forests. The Working Lands Steering Committee concluded, among other things, that a state-wide Purchase of Development Rights, or "PDR" program—one that would give landowners an option to work with land trusts and sell conservation easements on working lands—would help keep Wisconsin economically and ecologically healthy.

Gathering Waters Conservancy was proud to have a seat on that Steering Committee and we're proud now to be leading the movement to see its recommendations come to life.

This spring, Gathering Waters entered into a partnership with the American Farmland Trust (AFT), an organization dedicated to protecting the nation's agricultural resources. Together we plan to advance the Working Lands Recommendations for Wisconsin. In early June, Gathering Waters and AFT announced the Campaign for Wisconsin's Farm and Forest Lands and spent the summer laying groundwork for a legislative campaign to see the recommendations included in next year's state budget.

To this effort, AFT brings core funding and their extensive knowledge of how other states' programs work. Gathering Waters can deliver Wisconsin's powerful grassroots network of land conservation supporters and our respected, solution-oriented presence in the public arena.

By any measure, the vitality of our state depends on the vitality of rural lands. Wisconsin is losing farmland at a disturbing rate—about 30,000 acres a year—faster than any other state in the Midwest. As is true in many places, the best farmland is being lost first. Our 16 million acres of forestland are being fragmented and pulled out of production by subdivision. Well-planned development underlies our local economies, and we want Wisconsin to thrive. But, the facts point toward an unavoidable conclusion that working lands are essential to Wisconsin's growth and they need a champion.

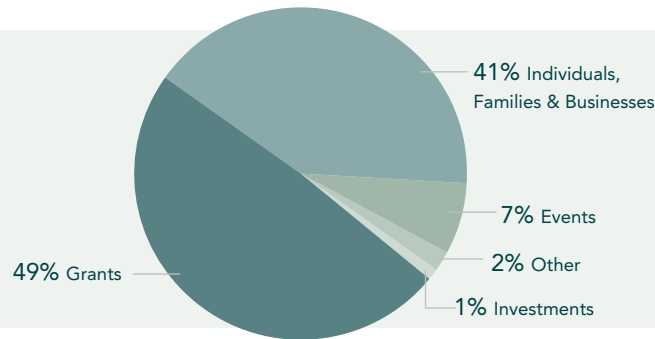
Gathering Waters has long believed that Wisconsin farmers should have the option of a statewide PDR program. Such a program would be driven by voluntary decisions and designed to let landowners, land trusts and communities leverage private, local support with state dollars. A PDR program could be the backbone of efforts to strengthen one of our state's most important industries and help families keep irreplaceable lands available for farming.

As you enjoy this year's harvest, keep the land and labor that produced it in mind and stay tuned. As our new fiscal year progresses, you'll hear more about this exciting work.

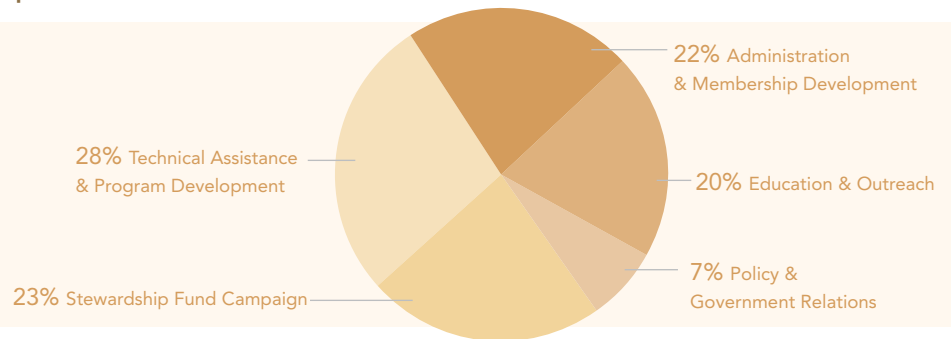


Photo courtesy of USDA

FY 2008 Income \$695,332



FY 2008 Expenses \$709,104



**A note on the deficit**

For the past 5 years, Gathering Waters Conservancy has had a budget surplus each June, resulting in a cash reserve of 60% of our annual operating budget. We chose in FY 2008 to invest in our staff and expand programs, knowing we could draw on those reserves and weather an operating deficit. We originally approved a \$50,000 deficit; through fundraising and efficient spending, we closed the year showing the above \$13,773 deficit instead.

operating deficit: \$13,772

	June 30, 2008	June 30, 2007
<b>ASSETS</b>		
Cash and investments	\$428,467	\$555,627
Unconditional promises to give	409,681	164,024
Other	11,410	12,499
<b>Total assets</b>	<b>849,558</b>	<b>732,150</b>
<b>LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS</b>		
<i>Liabilities</i>		
Accounts payable	13,394	8,569
Accrued payroll and expenses	10,438	23,941
<b>Total liabilities</b>	<b>23,832</b>	<b>32,510</b>
<i>Net Assets</i>		
Unrestricted	418,587	432,679
Temporarily restricted	407,139	266,961
<b>Total net assets</b>	<b>825,726</b>	<b>699,640</b>
<b>Total liabilities and net assets</b>	<b>\$849,558</b>	<b>\$732,150</b>





Mitchell Glenn • Photo courtesy Green Lake Conservancy Foundation

**Land Legacy Society**

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*"Gathering Waters Conservancy is the fulcrum for land conservation in Wisconsin. They have built a notably effective land trust community in that state and initiated collaborative programs that are setting the standard for other land trust service centers around the country. They are one of the key engines of strategic land conservation in the Midwest and an essential ally of the Land Trust Alliance's work regionally and nationally."*

*Erin Heskett,  
 Midwest Program Director  
 for the Land Trust Alliance*

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we help **people**  
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*Wisconsin land trusts help kids discover their own backyards, offer businesses opportunities to participate in local conservation, partner with municipalities to work conservation into comprehensive plans, and more.*

Courtesy of Kinnickinnic River Land Trust and Greenwood Elementary

We often explain that at Gathering Waters Conservancy, we work to make land trusts community institutions as valued as local libraries. "Community institutions" do a good deal more than help individual landowners achieve lasting conservation of their own property. Wisconsin land trusts help kids discover their own backyards, offer businesses opportunities to participate in local conservation, partner with municipalities to work conservation into comprehensive plans, and more.

In 2007 the Kinnickinnic River Land Trust (KRLT) sent a brochure to schools statewide describing their rain garden project. Their mission to work with the community to protect the natural resources and scenic beauty of the Kinnickinnic River Watershed led them into the River Falls Schools where they

and nearly 750 students, teachers and volunteers built rain gardens beneath school downspouts. Those 750 people know now, if they didn't before, the important connection between storm water runoff and river water quality. They also know now the resource they have in their land trust.

This year Gathering Waters helped KRLT conduct an organizational assessment—an exercise to help them identify actions that will make them stronger still, and a requirement of application for national accreditation. KRLT is currently under review for accreditation by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. We're proud of our association with the creative community institutions that are Wisconsin's land trusts. Read more inside about how we equip them for more great work to come.