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## Celebrate Victory at the Wisconsin Supreme Court!

**Thanks to your faithful support, a 6-1 majority of justices voted to put the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program back on track.**

It's already been a big year for conservation in Wisconsin!

Early in 2024, the largest conservation project in modern state history — the 70,000-acre Pelican River Forest — became a reality, thanks to the tireless efforts of local volunteers and the support of Governor Tony Evers.

Now, the Wisconsin Supreme Court has ruled that the Legislature's Joint Committee on Finance can no longer obstruct Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program grants, deeming such actions unconstitutional.

Gathering Waters intervened as a party in the case, which was brought by Attorney General Josh Kaul on behalf of the Governor.

During the oral arguments back in April,

our attorney told the Court why anonymous objections and indefinite delays have been so harmful to conservation projects.

Notably, the Court's near-unanimous decision transcends ideological lines.

Justice Rebecca Bradley authored the majority opinion. She was joined by all but one of her colleagues. This broad consensus underscored that the ruling was about good governance and constitutional integrity rather than partisan politics.

This decision is a major success worth celebrating!

**None of this would have been possible without your support. You and thousands of other conservation supporters demanded change — and you got it!**

In the future, Knowles-Nelson grants will be handled with transparency and predictability. Wisconsin's land trusts are now empowered to protect special places without undue interference from legislative inaction or backroom politics.

**Thank you for your support and for speaking up for land conservation. You are making a difference! Learn more at:**  
[gatheringwaters.org/supreme-court-victory](https://gatheringwaters.org/supreme-court-victory)



Photos courtesy of Driftless Area Land Conservancy



# Your generosity helped protect Wisconsin's waters

**Wisconsin's brook trout are finicky. They need clear, cool water to thrive. Gathering Waters' Land Conservation Law Program helped ensure that habitat for these native fish will be protected for generations.**

In 2016, Lowery Creek was one of only a handful of streams in southern Wisconsin enrolled in the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) brook trout spawning program. The creek was healthy, but only classified as a Class 2 trout stream. There was room for improvement.

That same year, Dick Cates of Cates Family Farm purchased a parcel of land that included nearly a mile and a half of Lowery Creek and its unnamed branches. The property included an existing conservation easement held by Driftless Area Land Conservancy.

The Cates Family leaned into their strong conservation ethic, stewarding the creek as they expanded their innovative rotational grazing program for their grass-fed beef operation.

**The Cates Family has demonstrated how farming and conservation can exist in harmony.**

Lowery Creek's water quality steadily improved. In 2020, the DNR found an abundant population of native brook trout were naturally reproducing and thriving.

The DNR upgraded the creek to a Class 1 trout stream and asked the Cates Family to place a Stream Bank Protection easement over the original conservation easement in order to improve public access and protect critical habitat that supports this vibrant fishery.

Today, if you visit Lowery Creek in Iowa County, you have the opportunity to fish for native brook trout. This spring-fed Class 1 trout stream and a 132-foot-wide corridor along its banks are protected forever.

**Thanks to your support, Driftless Area Land Conservancy worked with an expert attorney through the Land Conservation Law Program to complete this project.**

*"The Stream Bank Protection easement preserves one of Wisconsin's highest quality waterways," said Chris Gutschenritter, Director of the Land Conservation Law Program. "The health of the creek testifies to the successful integration of innovative farming practices with conservation efforts."*

**Because of you, Lowery Creek is now open for public fishing, allowing more people to connect with nature. Learn more at [gatheringwaters.org/trout](https://gatheringwaters.org/trout)**

# You're part of a rich and vibrant history of land protection

**During our first 15 years — from 1994 to 2009 — Gathering Waters focused on growing and strengthening Wisconsin's land trust community. Our priorities have evolved, but our mission has not changed.**

In 1994, our founders — Bud Jordahl, Rob Chambers, Jean Meanwell, Bill O'Connor, and Geoff Maclay (photo right) — formed Gathering Waters to help people protect the places that make Wisconsin special.

## **Their vision has proven timeless.**

From our humble start, renting office space at The Nature Conservancy, Gathering Waters grew, hiring our first Executive Director, Brian Hotz, in 1995. At that time, there were a dozen land trusts in Wisconsin.

In our first year, Gathering Waters helped establish five land trusts and assisted in the protection of nearly 2,500 acres.

**After the organization's early growth, Vicki Elkin became our Executive Director in 1998.**



*“Gathering Waters’ vision and mission are as relevant today as they were three decades ago. As we reflect on our history, one thing is crystal clear: Gathering Waters’ success is directly tied to the support of people like you who love Wisconsin! Thank you!” ~ Mike Carlson, Executive Director*

Under Vicki's leadership, the land trust community expanded. By 2005, 50 land trusts employed dozens of conservation professionals and engaged countless volunteers. The land trust community had helped protect 135,000 acres with the generous support of 43,000 members.

*“Gathering Waters invests in community-based conservation, encouraging and empowering people to shape the future. Land trusts work with countless landowners and communities across Wisconsin to protect and preserve the special places they love.” ~ Vicki Elkin*

## **Mike Strigel then took the helm as Executive Director in 2006.**

At that time, Vicki Elkin shifted to another important role focused on the reauthorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

The result? A resounding success.

During a contentious and hard-fought state budget debate, state funding for conservation was extended for 10 years and increased by 40 percent in 2007.

*“Gathering Waters thrives because Wisconsinites agree that land conservation is essential. Many of you have made a commitment to protect the land. Your investment helps lay the groundwork for the future.” ~ Mike Strigel*

By the end of 2009, Gathering Waters served a land trust community that had helped protect over 200,000 acres across Wisconsin.

**In our first 15 years, Gathering Waters had earned a reputation as a state, regional, and national conservation leader.**

**Next time, we'll share organizational milestones from 2010 to present. Until then learn more at [gatheringwaters.org/first-15](http://gatheringwaters.org/first-15)**

# New legislative maps create uncertainty

WILL YOU MAKE A SPECIAL GIFT TO HELP PUBLIC OFFICIALS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF LAND PROTECTION IN WISCONSIN?

**No one knows what the next election holds, especially for the Wisconsin Legislature.**

Conservation is at a crossroads — and the future of state funding for land protection is at stake.

**The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program must be renewed in the 2025 state budget or else this crucial source of funding will end.**

It's going to take a major advocacy effort — greater than ever before — to convince the Legislature to reauthorize the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program early next year.

And with the redrawing of legislative districts across the state, there's even more uncertainty than in the past.

**Will you make a gift of \$35, \$50, or \$100 to help tell elected officials and candidates for office about the need for more funding for land protection?**

Gathering Waters' advocacy team is proactively reaching out to as many elected officials and candidates as possible this summer.

**Now is the time to take action.**

Crisscrossing the state to attend events, meet lawmakers, and talk to them about the positive



**Will you make a special gift to speak up for state funding for land protection? Your gift will help elected officials and candidates for office understand why land protection is important and will help them recognize protected places in their districts.**

impact of land protection in their district is costly and time-consuming. It's also mission critical for land conservation.

**Will you make a gift of \$35, \$50, or \$100 to help make sure state funding for land conservation continues in Wisconsin?**

Will you help with a special gift today?

**I will help tell elected officials and candidates about land protection!**

**YES!** Please use my gift to get the word out to as many elected officials and candidates as you can, and support all the work of Gathering Waters. Enclosed is my gift of:

- \$35 to help elected officials and candidates understand the importance of land protection.
- \$50 to help elected officials and candidates understand the importance of land protection.
- \$100 to help elected officials and candidates understand the importance of land protection.
- I'm sending \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to help elected officials and candidates understand the importance of land protection.

I am giving:  by check.  by credit card.  by making a secure online donation at [gatheringwaters.org/donate](https://gatheringwaters.org/donate)