

YOUR DONOR REPORT

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You helped create a fertile environment for land protection

Because of you, Wisconsin land trusts have an extensive network of conservation partners to help protect land.

Recently, **Groundswell Conservancy** worked with the Bjugstad family to protect 189 acres of prime farmland in Rock County.

Groundswell applied for a grant through the **Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program**.

However, before they could secure this crucial state funding, they first had to raise half of the money for the purchase from other sources.

Thanks to generous supporters and partners like the **American Farmland Trust** and the **Wisconsin Farmland Protection Partnership**, Groundswell could access the necessary funding through a federal **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)** grant, **Rock County's Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements Program**, and the **Rock River Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever**.



“We want to pass the love of farming down to future generations,” said Brian Bjugstad. “Let’s keep this agricultural land preserved along with the history of stories embedded into the soil.” The Bjugstad family, including Brian’s parents, Oscar and Norma, joined by conservation partners.

Groundswell collaborated with the landowners, **Brian and Renee Bjugstad**, to craft a conservation easement that would ensure the agricultural viability and integrity of this vital piece of farmland between Evansville and Janesville.

The land protection agreement states that the property will remain in agricultural production and continue as a crucial wildlife habitat for pheasants, waterfowl, and songbirds—all preserved for future generations.

The Bjugstads also wanted to ensure the tradition of public access for the community, keeping the land open for hunting, hiking, cross-country skiing, and bird watching.

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Without the threat of anonymous objections from the **Legislature's Joint Finance Committee**, millions of dollars in grants for land trust projects have been awarded by the **Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources** since last summer. For the first time in over a decade, land trusts applied for all of the state funding that was available for land protection last year.

Thank you again for your continued support in preserving Wisconsin's agricultural heritage and natural resources for future generations.

You helped strengthen Wisconsin's land trusts with legal services and technical support

Imagine... you've been hired for your dream job as a conservation manager at a land trust. You bring a deep passion for nature and years of experience as a wetland scientist. You know how to manage land to keep habitat healthy. You're pumped about your new position!

Then reality hits.

One of your first major assignments is to create a land protection agreement that recognizes the landowner's wishes, stands the test of time, and complies with all applicable standards and laws.

This has not been part of your prior professional experience. You feel the weight of this responsibility—the landowner's trust and the land trust's reputation—and you know it depends on you getting every detail correct!

Thankfully, land trust staff have a place to go for expert advice when handling legal issues and creating agreements that will protect land in perpetuity—**Gathering Waters' Land Conservation Law Program**.



Photo courtesy of Chris Gutschenritter

Thanks to you, Wisconsin's land trusts have the knowledge and skills to create land protection agreements that will last for generations.

Over the last three years, your support has helped the Law Program grow and evolve.

Instead of solely providing direct legal services on individual projects, the program has advanced into something far more impactful: increasing the skills of land trust staff and boards of directors to better understand the requirements of national Land Trust Standards and Practices.

Working with the Land Conservation Law Program equips land trust staff and volunteers with the specialized knowledge and skills they need to create robust and enduring conservation agreements.

“When we first launched the program, we were in what I'd call a ‘triage phase,’” explains program director Chris Gutschenritter. “We almost exclusively handled legal work for specific land trust projects, producing solid land protection agreements. While this met immediate needs, it didn't address the long-term goal of building organizational capacity.”

Today, thanks to your support, land trust leaders are now more confident navigating sophisticated conservation projects with enhanced skills and expertise in title review and easement negotiation.

The Land Conservation Law Program's evolution reflects a deeper understanding of the needs among Wisconsin land trusts and what makes conservation agreements last.

While well-drafted legal documents are an essential part, truly durable conservation requires knowledgeable, confident leaders who are capable of creating, monitoring, and enforcing these agreements for generations to come.

"We're not just here for the short-term or individual deals," notes Chris Gutschenritter. "We're investing in growing expert capacity across the state. When land trust staff understand what to do and why they're doing it, they create more resilient conservation outcomes."

This approach benefits the entire land trust community.

As land trust staff become more knowledgeable, they reduce their organization's legal costs while maintaining high standards and practices. They're also better equipped to engage with local attorneys, expanding the number of professionals with conservation law experience.

Of course, land trusts still have access to the Land Conservation Law Program when questions arise, and the law program will continue to monitor legal issues at the state and federal levels to ensure Wisconsin's land trusts can adapt to new policies and regulations.

Your support of the Land Conservation Law Program helps strengthen Wisconsin's Land Trusts.

Unlike many traditional law firms, we don't gauge success by the number of hours we bill or the number of land deals completed. Instead, we gauge our success by Wisconsin's land trust leaders' confidence, expertise, and ability to protect land in their community for generations.

Thank you for your support.

Your support has made a land conservation convening possible!

Wisconsin's land trust community is preparing to gather for the **2025 Wisconsin Land Trust Conference**. The three-day event, March 12-14, combines advocacy, education, and peer networking.

The Land Trust Conference will kick off with the first-ever Knowles-Nelson Lobby Day on March 12. (See page four for more information.)

The educational and networking aspects of the conference will then take place on Thursday and Friday in and around Madison.

Thanks to your support, the conference will offer a rich schedule of informative sessions and engaging workshops about land stewardship, communications and fundraising, and conservation planning, among other topics.

Attendees will also take a field trip to explore special places protected by **Groundswell Conservancy** and other partners, including sections of a premier trout stream in the Black Earth Creek Valley.

There's something for everyone!

If you're interested in attending the Land Trust Conference, please register at gatheringwaters.org/conference or contact Lily Butler at lily@gatheringwaters.org.

SUPPORT STATE FUNDING FOR LAND PROTECTION! SEND A PERSONALIZED POSTCARD TO YOUR LEGISLATORS. IT'S EASY. START YOURS TODAY AT [KNOWLESNELSON.ORG/POSTCARD](https://knowlesnelson.org/postcard).



WILL YOU SEND YOUR BEST GIFT TO HELP SAVE
STATE FUNDING FOR LAND PROTECTION?



Will you help safeguard state funding for land protection?

State funding for land protection could end!

Opponents have publicly threatened to kill Wisconsin's Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. And many new legislators are unaware of the positive impact this program has made in local communities.

That's why we're inviting as many people as possible to join us for the first-ever **Knowles-Nelson Lobby Day** on March 12 in Madison.

Conservationists from all corners of Wisconsin will gather to share their views face-to-face with their elected representatives.

Will you help make this event possible with your best gift?

This is a crucial step in the fight to save state funding. The day-long event starts with breakfast and an advocacy training followed by lunch and briefings.

Then more than a hundred people will head to the State Capitol to talk to their elected officials

about the critical need for the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

The impact will be powerful!

When legislators hear directly from their constituents, it will underscore the need for this vital source of state funding in their home districts.

Gathering Waters is organizing Lobby Day and underwriting the costs—making it free to all who want to participate.

Travel scholarships are also available to encourage as many people as possible to attend. A strong showing by the conservation community will send an enduring message to lawmakers.

Will you make your best gift today to help legislators understand why they should save state funding for land conservation and protect Wisconsin's land, water, and wildlife for future generations?

I will help save state funding for land protection!

YES! I will help save state funding by helping people participate in Knowles-Nelson Lobby Day and supporting all the work of Gathering Waters. Enclosed is my gift of:

- \$35 to help save state funding by helping people take part in Knowles-Nelson Lobby Day.
- \$50 to help save state funding by helping people take part in Knowles-Nelson Lobby Day.
- \$100 to help save state funding by helping people take part in Knowles-Nelson Lobby Day.
- Here's \$ ____ to help save state funding by helping people take part in Knowles-Nelson Lobby Day.

I am giving: by check. by credit card. by DAF or IRA distribution. I want to learn more about including GW in my estate plan.