

# YOUR DONOR REPORT

Photo courtesy of Scott Erickson

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## Thank you for helping build the capacity of local land trusts!

**A decade had passed since Seno K/RLT Conservancy (Seno) closed a new land protection project. After working with the Land Conservation Law Program (LCLP), this local land trust is now protecting additional acres and has gained the confidence to draft its own conservation easements.**

When Scott Erickson approached Seno about protecting 242 acres his family had owned for three generations, the organization's Executive Director, Stacy Santiago, picked up the phone and called LCLP Director, Chris Gutschenritter.

Stacy and her Board President, Mark Lesko, worked closely with Chris, learning about conservation statutes, legal descriptions, and real estate titles.

The project, which began as a file folder of documents, soon came together as a solid conservation easement that will ensure the property remains protected forever.



Photo courtesy of Seno K/RLT

*“Seno’s success is the Law Program’s success,” Chris Gutschenritter said. “By serving as a trusted partner, our goal is to help land trusts protect more land and empower them to build internal capacity.” Pictured L to R: Scott Erickson, Lief Erickson, Scott Edwards, Mark Lesko, and Stacy Santiago*

The LCLP model supports land trusts with expert legal guidance so they can move their work forward with strength and clarity.

*“Working with the LCLP gave us the skills to draft a sound easement on our own when the next project came along,” said Stacy.*

*“It’s been encouraging to see Seno’s growth,” Chris said. “Their staff gained the knowledge and skills to anticipate and address complex challenges that can arise in easement projects. They’re advancing their conservation work thoughtfully and have engaged legal counsel at the right moments — an efficient and effective use of the LCLP.”*

Mark also shared his appreciation for the responsiveness of Chris and Gathering Waters’ Staff Attorney, Karen Bassler — they were in

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regular contact and took the time to explain why they were making certain recommendations and changes. *“This type of learning can be cost-prohibitive when working with law firms that charge several hundred dollars an hour,” Mark said. “Working with Chris and Karen has incredible value and has increased our confidence when protecting properties.”*

**Thank you for your support of the Land Conservation Law Program.**



**To read more of the story, visit [gatheringwaters.org/LCLP-Seno](https://gatheringwaters.org/LCLP-Seno).**

## A Familiar Face Returns to Protect Wisconsin

### Meet Karen Bassler, Staff Attorney

Karen Bassler joined the Land Conservation Law Program at the end of 2025. Many may remember Karen from her role as Gathering Waters’ program director from 2001 to 2009.



**Karen Bassler**

Since then, Karen has expanded her skills to better serve nonprofits, including earning a law degree from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 2021. In recent years, she worked in legal aid and housing. But her passion for the land never faded.

*“Gathering Waters is my origin story,” Karen shared. “I help land trusts update outdated policies and procedures, and answer easement, management, and enforcement questions.”*

Karen guides land trusts through the legal complexities of conservation. She assists with real estate deals, legal compliance, and training. Her expertise helps ensure land trusts are resilient and their land protection agreements last.

When she’s not in the office, Karen is likely on an adventure with her huskies.

Email her at [karen@gatheringwaters.org](mailto:karen@gatheringwaters.org).

## Building Connections for Conservation

### Meet Danni Niles, Director of Philanthropy

Danni Niles joined the team in the fall of 2025, bringing a love for the land that began on her family’s farm.



**Danni Niles**

*“Having grown up working on my parents’ CSA farm, I learned that it is everyone’s job to care for and protect the land and water,” Danni said.*

After honing her skills in library work, Danni joined Groundswell Conservancy in 2018. She also has held roles at Driftless Area Land Conservancy, where she serves on the board, and at Monk Botanical Gardens.

Danni envisions a team where everyone flourishes and grows to their highest potential.

*“I’m excited to work with this incredible team,” Danni said. “One of my first priorities is to provide the land trust community with new legacy planning resources to help them make a difference forever.”*

When she’s not working to protect Wisconsin’s special places, Danni enjoys gardening, reading, art, and family bike rides with her children.

Danni is eager to hear your conservation story. Email her at [danni@gatheringwaters.org](mailto:danni@gatheringwaters.org).

# You helped fight a good fight

We wish we could share good news about a bipartisan breakthrough at the State Capitol.

Unfortunately, this continues to be a turbulent time for the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

On Feb. 18, the State Senate pulled Stewardship from their floor calendar because there weren't enough votes to pass the Republican-authored bills along party lines.

Senator Jodi Habush Sinykin (D-Whitefish Bay) offered a simple amendment to extend state funding for the program for just one year, but it was rejected in a partisan vote.

The result — NO state funding for new land trust projects and continued uncertainty about the future of Knowles-Nelson.



For more details and timely updates, visit [knowlesnelson.org](http://knowlesnelson.org).

# You helped land trusts see nature's silent work with innovative maps

Digital tools help land trusts prioritize key land protection projects

When you walk through a forest, you may hear the chorus of birds, but you might not notice the land quietly filtering water or absorbing harmful air pollution.

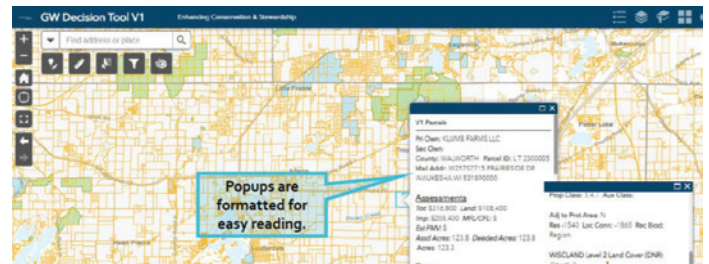
Nature is often doing more work than we realize.

**Now, thanks to your support, land trusts can measure the value of these natural services when they are choosing land protection projects.**

The latest upgrade of the Geographic Information System (GIS) Decision Support Tool can analyze the natural services provided by land protection projects, in addition to property type and conservation values.

The mapping tool allows land trusts to identify properties that protect critical wildlife corridors, preserve forests, or safeguard water quality.

*“The Decision Support Tool puts a dollar value on the work that nature does for us,” said Charlie Carlin, Director of Strategic Initiatives. “Water*



Gathering Waters members protect nearly 2,000 properties encompassing more than 200,000 acres. These special places have many conservation values, which can be difficult to measure. Thanks to the GIS Decision Support Tool, land trusts can work more strategically.

*filtration, flood mitigation, air quality, carbon sequestration, or beautiful views are services people will pay for, and nature provides them for free.”*

For land trusts working with limited budgets and competing priorities, this information is vital for strategic planning.

*“Investing in updates to our GIS program is a long-term commitment,” Charlie said. “Each year, we add newly protected lands and new features.”*



**Your support gives land trusts access to a powerful land protection tool.**

Learn more at [gatheringwaters.org/value-map](http://gatheringwaters.org/value-map).

# The next election will shape the future of land protection

CANDIDATES FOR OFFICE NEED TO HEAR HOW MUCH PROTECTING WISCONSIN'S LAND AND WATER MATTERS TO VOTERS



Photo Courtesy of Ice Age Trail Alliance

Many candidates for public office don't know how the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program protects special places across the state, such as working forests, wetlands, shorelines, farmland, and outdoor recreational areas.

## Will you help educate candidates about the bipartisan public support for land protection?

The 2026 midterm elections could reshape the Wisconsin Legislature — and with it, the future of land protection funding.

Many candidates have started their campaigns.

Together, we need to inform every elected official and candidate about land protection. Your support makes that possible.

## Will you make a special gift to help inform candidates for public office about the benefits of land protection?

You will help advocates build relationships with candidates and show how state funding has been used to protect land — adding economic value and health benefits to local communities.

You'll help share results of recent polls showing that more than 90 percent of voters in Wisconsin support state funding for land conservation.

These mission-critical activities require crisscrossing the state, attending events, and meeting candidates. It's time-consuming but essential work.

Decisions that are made by the next slate of elected officials will determine the future of state funding for land and water protection in Wisconsin.

## Your support helps reach them on the campaign trail — before votes are cast.

Together, we can ensure state funding continues to protect Wisconsin's land, water, and wildlife for generations to come.

## Will you make a special gift to help ensure every candidate and lawmaker understands value of state funding for land protection?

### I will help candidates understand the value of state funding for land protection!

**YES!** Please use my gift to make sure candidates for public office understand the value of state funding for land protection and to support all the work of Gathering Waters. Here's my gift of :

- \$35 to help inform candidates for public office about the value of state funding for land protection.
- \$50 to help inform candidates for public office about the value of state funding for land protection.
- \$100 to help inform candidates for public office about the value of state funding for land protection.
- Here's my best gift of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to help inform candidates for public office about the value of state funding for land protection.

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.