



September 11th, 2020

Secretary Preston Cole  
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources  
PO Box 7921  
Madison, WI 53707

RE: Re-authorization of Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program and Conservation Funding Needs in Wisconsin

Secretary Cole,

Our thanks to you and your staff for the opportunity for stakeholders to speak with Governor Evers and Lt. Governor Barnes on August 28<sup>th</sup> about the importance of the Knowles - Nelson Stewardship Program (KNSP). I want to follow up on your invitation to identify additional needs and offer suggestions on ways to successfully frame the case for increased conservation funding in the next biennium and beyond.

### **Conservation Funding Needs are Growing**

The traditional uses for Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program funding are important and just as necessary today as they were when the program was first created in 1989. However important new conservation needs have also emerged since KNSP was created. Among the most urgent of those needs are a need to help communities by **mitigating the risk of climate change impacts from severe storms that threaten public safety and property**, and the need to **protect water quality from non-point source contaminants that threaten public health**.

*Revision and re-authorization of our current Stewardship Program can be an essential strategy in protecting and conserving critical lands that will help mitigate these threats.*

Please consider the following suggestions for making needed revisions and building public support for re-authorization of our KNSP.

## Framing

To secure the public and legislative support necessary for an expanded re-authorization of a stewardship / conservation funding program, the stakeholders to this effort will need to create a strong case for support that speaks to our most urgent important and urgent priorities. In framing the case for support, we encourage a clear focus on:

- ✓ **Protecting Vulnerable Communities from Climate-related Impacts**  
Our investment can help local communities prepare for and mitigate the impacts of climate change by identifying and protecting wetlands, floodplains and floodways, and other areas that can provide natural flood attenuation.
- ✓ **Protecting Clean Water**  
Our investment will support conservation practices in targeted areas that will reduce nutrient and contaminant inputs that threaten public and private water supplies.
- ✓ **Offsetting Greenhouse Gas Emissions**  
Our investment can help protect and restore forests, grassland, and wetlands, and incentivize conservation practices on agricultural lands that will collectively offset as much as 1/3 of our state's total greenhouse gas emissions.
- ✓ **Investing in Quality of Life in our Communities**  
Our investment can improve the quality of life and health of Wisconsin residents in cities, including many of our most vulnerable populations. Parks, greenspaces, and urban trees are known to improve air quality, reduce noise, reduce heat island effects, and are strongly associated with positive measures of community viability.
- ✓ **Maintaining Our Rural Way of Life on Working Farms and Forests**  
Our investment can help protect working lands, including the farms and forest lands that are the backbone of our rural way of life in Wisconsin. Protecting working forests through conservation easements has long been a staple part of the KKSP.

This new focus on protecting farms with demonstrated conservation practices can be a new key role for an enhanced stewardship program. Investments in forest and farm easements will help **keep forests in forests** and will help **keep farmers on their land** at a time when, tragically, we are losing farms at historic rates.

## Program Design

While the Knowles – Nelson Stewardship Program has been an unqualified Wisconsin success, it is time to re-design a conservation funding program that address urgent new priorities that were simply not recognized at the time the KNSP was last authorized. Building the public support for renewed conservation funding in 2021 will require meeting the most basic needs and helping solve the most pressing problems for most Wisconsin residents. **Clean drinking water, a dry home or business, a safe community, and the ability to continue a family way of life** are priorities at the top of the list for many Wisconsin residents and any conservation funding program needs to address those needs.

**We believe the total reauthorization of KNSP should be significantly increased from its current levels.** In particular, we recommend the following elements within a renewed conservation funding program:

- ✓ Fund **Non-profit Conservation Organizations** grants at a minimum of \$12 million.
- ✓ Fund **Local Assistance Grants** at a minimum of \$12 million.
- ✓ Create new bonding authority for expanded **Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE)** at a minimum of \$12 million. PACE easements should be highly targeted to priority areas for water quality protection or flood abatement and to farmland protection projects with proven and substantial conservation benefits.
- ✓ Stipulate project scoring that will prioritize **floodplain and flood reduction** conservation activities in all sub-programs.
- ✓ Stipulate project scoring will prioritize targeted **watershed and well-head protection** through conservation acquisition and conservation practices in all sub-programs.
- ✓ Stipulate that local units of government accessing Local Assistance Grants are eligible for funding for and incentivized to **conduct natural hazard risk assessments and climate adaptation plans** with technical support provided from WDNR staff.
- ✓ Restore flexibility to **carry forward unobligated funds from year to year**, and for the administration to **transfer unobligated funds** from any sub-program to address projects addressing flood control, or water quality protection.

Whether these recommendations all fall within the re-authorization of KNSP, or whether some priorities such as expanded PACE easements are funded independently of KNSP, we believe these priorities reflect a level of need, and conservation program uses significantly greater than existing funding levels.

### **Stakeholders**

Passing an effective conservation funding program will require a broad coalition that reflects the interests of urban, rural, and suburban communities. The existing coalition of land trusts, sporting organizations, and county and municipal interests that has supported KNSP has been critical to thirty years of success and past support. We believe that broadening our stewardship coalition even further with a spectrum of **urban and community organizations**, as well as **rural and farm-oriented organizations** will be needed to help assure support for reauthorization at an increased level. With an even broader coalition, a new conservation funding program in Wisconsin can provide essential benefits to every Wisconsin resident, and gain broad support across the aisle, and across the state.

### **Branding**

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program is an iconic Wisconsin brand. It is well recognized and supported by a large segment of Wisconsin outdoor lovers and users. **Like any brand however, periodic re-design and repositioning is needed to remain vital.** Many Wisconsin residents will no longer recognize the names Knowles and Nelson, and many others associate the current program with somewhat traditional focus on purchase of public lands for hunting and fishing. These are critical needs, but not the only needs.

To continue our tradition of conservation investments, we need to reach people with a message and associations that are meaningful to them today. We suggest that work is needed to position this program and craft new messages about its importance in a way that will resonate with the 2021 citizens and policy makers who will need to support it.



I hope that these recommendations are useful as you consider how to position Wisconsin to face some of our greatest conservation challenges. Wisconsin's Green Fire and our many members are dedicated to supporting this effort and stand ready to work with you to advance these goals. Please let me know how we can be helpful in following up.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fred Clark".

Fred Clark, Executive Director

Cc. Beth Bier  
Todd Ambs