

FOCUS: THE STATE'S STEWARDSHIP FUND



The Wild Rivers Legacy Forest in Forest County, one of the areas that has been conserved through the state's Stewardship Fund, features old growth cedar along the Pine River. Jeff Richter/Special to the Press-Gazette

Conservation group backs call for Fund's renewal

Stewardship program has helped protect almost 480,000 acres

BY KEVIN NAZE

Press-Gazette correspondent

Wisconsin hunters and anglers — and anyone else who enjoys public access to forests, parklands, fisheries and wildlife areas — will be able to enjoy those places for generations to come thanks to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund.

Todd Holschbach of Manitowoc, director of government relations for The Nature Conservancy's Madison office, said the program is one that any outdoors lover could support.

"These are some of Wisconsin's last great places that are being protected," he said.

On Wednesday, The Nature Conservancy — Wisconsin's largest land conservation organization — applauded Gov. Jim Doyle's call in his 2007-2009 budget address Tuesday night to reauthorize the fund at \$105 million per year through 2020.

"Gov. Doyle has shown outstanding leadership in land conservation," Holschbach said. "Since he's been in office, we've conserved more than 160,000 acres, and the vast majority are open to hunting and fishing."

Since the program was established in 1989, it has helped protect almost 480,000 acres in 71 counties, providing public access for outdoor activities including hunting, fishing, hiking, canoeing, wildlife watching and biking.

Key to the success, Holschbach said,

Submit a comment

A subcommittee of the state Natural Resources Board formed to provide input on reauthorization of the Stewardship Fund is seeking public comment by Wednesday.

The subcommittee may invite some of the people submitting comments to speak at a Feb. 27 meeting.

Interested individuals and organizations can e-mail comments to Laurie.Ross@Wisconsin.gov or mail to Laurie Ross, DNR, P.O. Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707-7921.

is the partnership between state and local governments and non-profit organizations. The Stewardship Fund provides matching grants to local governments and non-profits for land acquisition.

If Doyle's request is authorized by the state Legislature, funding would increase by \$45 million per year starting in 2011. The program is set to expire June 30, 2010, unless reauthorized.

"Stewardship purchases since 1990 have protected and assured public access to forests, parklands, fisheries and wildlife areas and other special places for generations to come," Natural Resources Board member John Welter said. "Wisconsin treasures its natural places, and if we are going to continue to protect and provide access to them, the Stewardship program must be reauthorized."

The DNR has acquired more than 425,000 acres of the land protected. About 95 percent of that is open to hunt-

ing and 97 percent is open to fishing.

The few properties that are closed to hunting on a year-round basis are due to scenic and farmland protection easements, sensitive habitat protection easements, non-point easements, and easements acquired for fishing only such as narrow corridors along trout streams.

Holschbach said TNC owns more than 25,000 acres in Wisconsin, with 95 percent of that open to deer hunting. More than 12,000 acres are open for various upland game, waterfowl and wild turkey hunts.

"We are always willing to work with partners and talk about areas of improvement," Holschbach said. "We have more than 21,000 members in Wisconsin, and thousands of them are hunters and fishers. We're certainly not anti-hunting."

In recent years, the group transferred 18,213 acres to state and federal agencies where access for all types of hunting is available. Holschbach said TNC was instrumental in the recent conservation of the Wild Rivers Legacy Forest, 63,884 acres that will have full access for all forms of hunting and fishing.

Local units of government have acquired 14,154 acres through the fund, or less than 3 percent of the total acres acquired. City and county parks, hiking trails, biking trails and open green spaces have been developed, with hunting access controlled by ordinances set by the local government.

Stewardship is funded through state-issued bonds. Created in 1989 as a 10-year program with \$25 million in annual funding, Stewardship was renewed a decade later by the Legislature for an additional 10-year period at \$60 million annually — less than half of 1 percent of the state budget.