

May 9, 2007

Dear Editor,

One thing that almost all Wisconsinites can agree on is that we love spending time outdoors. Whether it's hunting a favorite woods, fishing a lively trout stream, canoeing a wild river in the summer, or racing over a snow-covered hill on a snowmobile or skis, Wisconsin's forests, rivers, and lakes are important to our quality of life.

They're also critical to our tourism, forestry, and agricultural economies, which depend on a sustainable supply of natural resources.

Often, in order to ensure Wisconsin's unrivaled outdoor heritage, sporting groups and environmental groups join together and let decision-makers at the Capitol know that we are united in our support for maintaining, and creating more, outdoor recreation opportunities.

That was never more true than today. In February, Governor Doyle called for reauthorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, the state's innovative land and water conservation program, for another decade.

The Wisconsin Conservation Congress, The Nature Conservancy, Pheasants Forever, Gathering Waters Conservancy and other sporting and environmental groups are united in our support for this critical conservation program and have made its reauthorization a top priority.

In its first 17 years, the Stewardship Fund has conserved more than 460,000 acres of wildlife habitat, recreation land, and working forests. It has protected beautiful places like portions of the Lower Chippewa River, the Willow Flowage and Devil's Lake State Park.

The Stewardship Fund has also maintained some of the country's best land for hunting and waterways for fishing, created biking and hiking trails, and protected water quality in rivers and streams across the state. It has conserved habitat and recreation lands in 71 of Wisconsin's 72 counties.

In his 2007-2009 budget address, Governor Doyle proposed increasing the funding level of the Stewardship Fund from \$60 million/year to \$105 million.

This seems like a big increase until you look at how much land prices have risen since the program's inception. In 1990, an acre of forest or other open land in Dane County cost about \$260 to \$300. Today that same acre of land sells for approximately \$4,000 to \$5,000, an increase of about 1500%. Land prices have increased almost as dramatically in northern Wisconsin and other parts of the state.

Because we know they're important to our economy, we invest in our roads and other infrastructure. It's just as important to our economy and to our quality of life that we invest in our lands and waters.

Not everyone in Wisconsin is fortunate enough to own 40 acres of hunting land or a cabin on a lake. For most of us, Wisconsin's public lands are the places we go to hike on a trail, hunt with our grandkids, or camp in the woods. If we want our children and grandchildren to have the same recreation opportunities we enjoy today, we need to continue to conserve the best of outdoor Wisconsin.

We believe that a strong Stewardship Fund program, funded at a level that allows it to keep pace with rising land prices, is the best way to make that happen. It is critical that state residents who share our strong support for this important program communicate this support to their legislators.

Sincerely,

Ed Harvey, Chair
Wisconsin Conservation Congress

Mary Jean Huston, State Director
The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin

Michael Strigel, Executive Director
Gathering Waters Conservancy

Jeff Gaska, Director
Pheasants Forever

Bill Pielsticker, State Chair
Wisconsin Trout Unlimited