



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FROM:** Lori Weigel & Kathryn Hahne / New Bridge Strategy  
Dave Metz / FM3 Research  
**DATE:** September 15, 2020  
**RE:** Survey of Wisconsin Voters Shows Overwhelming, Consistent Support for Restoring Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program to Previous Levels of Funding

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A recent statewide survey of Wisconsin voters<sup>1</sup> conducted by the bipartisan research team of FM3 Research (D) and New Bridge Strategy (R) demonstrates overwhelming support for the Legislature investing in conservation efforts generally, as well as specifically for continuing the Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program. Moreover, four-in-five Wisconsin voters support restoring the Stewardship Program to previous levels of funding – essentially unchanged from support levels two years ago. Elected officials who vote to restore funding for the program are far more likely to receive a positive reception than a neutral or negative one. Support for restoring funding for the Stewardship Program extends across party lines, across various regions of the state, and across key demographic sub-groups. The survey also found that Wisconsin voters are much more likely to side with a rationale in support of the program rather than one opposed to it.

Specifically, the survey found that:

- **Support for conservation funding is at an all-time high in Wisconsin.** Fully 93 percent of the state’s electorate say the Legislature should continue “to dedicate public funding for land, water, and wildlife conservation in Wisconsin,” a view that is consistent with what we saw in 2015 (90% support) and 2018 (91% support). There is consistent intensity behind the desire to continue public funding for conservation as almost three-in-five (59 percent) feel “strongly” about this, up from 55 percent in 2015 and about the same as in 2018 (61 percent).
- **The proportion of Wisconsin voters who would tell their state Legislator to ensure that the work of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program is able to continue has remained steady since 2018.** Given voters’ lack of familiarity with the Program, survey respondents were provided with a brief, neutral explanation of the Program as follows:

*“The next questions deal more specifically with the Knowles -Nelson Stewardship Program established in 1989 and renewed four times over the last couple of decades. It is a state program that protects natural areas, water quality, wildlife habitat, and parks and provides public access for outdoor recreation through voluntary agreements with willing landowners. Through the*

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<sup>1</sup> **Methodology:** August 21-25, 2020, FM3 and POS completed 503 interviews among registered voters throughout the state of Wisconsin. Interviews were conducted online as well as on landlines and cell phones. The credibility interval (analogous to margin of error) for the full sample is +/-4.4 percent; margins of sampling error for subgroups within the sample will be larger. Some percentages may sum to more than 100 percent due to rounding.

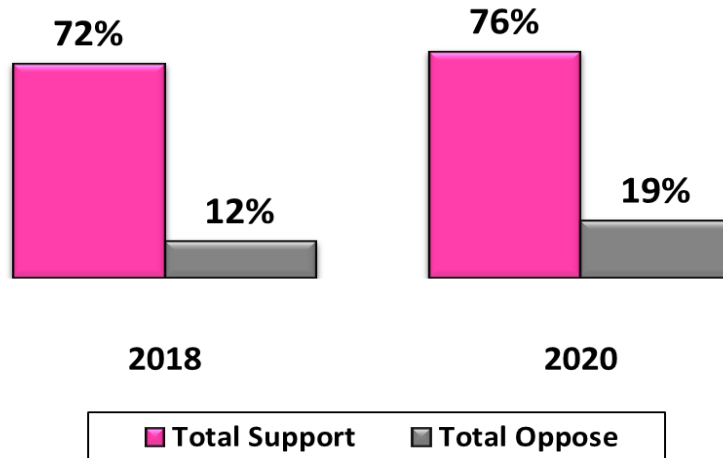
*Stewardship program, the state has protected important natural areas, wildlife habitat, and parks in every county in Wisconsin.”*

Having heard that, fully 92 percent say they would tell their Legislator to “continue to protect natural areas, wildlife habitat, and parks in Wisconsin through the Stewardship Program,” rather than stopping those conservation actions (a mere four percent). This view cuts across party lines, with 88 percent of Republicans, 90 percent of independents and 97 percent of Democrats saying they want their Legislator to continue the program.

Support for reauthorizing the Stewardship Program is essentially unchanged from two years ago, despite the pandemic and ensuing impact on the state budget. In 2018, 93 percent advocated for re-authorization, only one point different from today at 92%.

- **More than three-quarters of Wisconsin voters support restoring Stewardship Program funding to the \$86 million budget it once had.** Voters were told that funding had been \$86 million dollars as recently as 2010, but annual funding has been cut by more than half, to 33 million dollars last year. Fully 76 percent of Wisconsin voters support the Legislature restoring funding to the \$86 million-dollar level, with a majority (51 percent) strongly in support. This is a slight increase from 2018 when 72 percent of voters in the state said that they would support restoring funding.

#### ***Restore Funding to Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program***

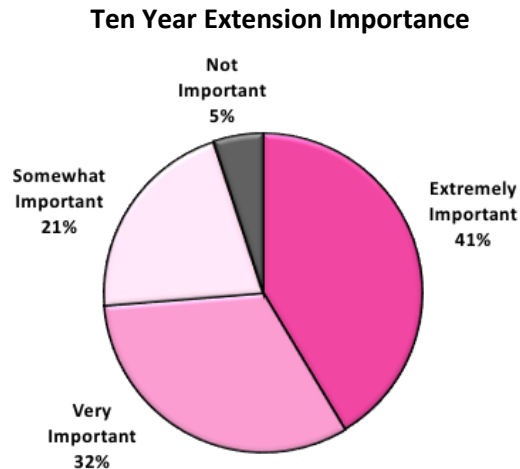


The desire to restore this funding is evident across all major segments of the electorate, including:

- ✓ 75% of men and 77% of women;
  - ✓ 76% of voters of color, and 74% of whites;
  - ✓ 78% of moderates, 61% of conservatives, and 89% of liberals;
  - ✓ 76% of hunters, 74% of anglers, and 78% of non-sportsmen;
  - ✓ 82% of those who have visited a state park in the last year;
  - ✓ 78% of voters in the Green Bay/Appleton media markets, 76% of voters in the Milwaukee media market, 72% of those in the Madison area, and 83% of those in the northern portions of the state;
- and

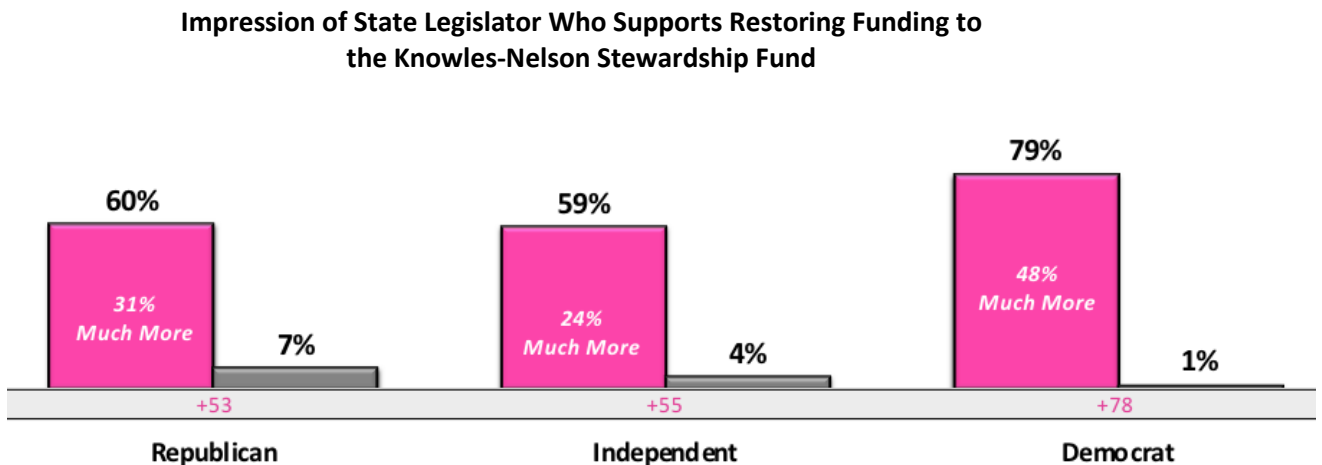
✓ 92% of Democrats, 69% of independents, and 66% of Republicans.

- Moreover, a ten-year extension on the funding is universally viewed by Wisconsin voters as important. Fully 73% say it is “extremely” or “very important” and 94% say a ten-year extension is at least “somewhat important.”



A ten-year extension is viewed as essential by voters regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, region or other key demographic sub-groups.

- Two-thirds of voters would have a more favorable impression of a Legislator who votes to restore funding to the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. A substantial 67 percent of the state’s voters indicate they would have a more positive impression of their State Legislator if he or she voted in favor of restoring funding for the Stewardship Program. Across party lines there is no downside for a state legislator who takes this position as voters of all parties are either positive or neutral in their view, as this graph depicts:



- **Support for the Stewardship Program also stays strong after exposure to pro and con arguments.** Almost four-in-five say they would side with a support statement over an opposition statement.

Supporters say that Wisconsin has been blessed with beautiful lakes, rivers, and forests. During these difficult times, we have all recently seen the importance of getting outdoors for our physical and mental health. Plus, here in Wisconsin outdoor recreation generates nearly 18 billion dollars, and supports 168,000 jobs. We need to protect our drinking water sources, support our economy, and continue outdoor traditions for future generations.

78%

...OR...

Opponents say that small businesses are closing, many people have lost jobs and state revenues are down. We have protected hundreds of thousands of acres, and we do not need to preserve more public lands at this time, when we have other important needs like health care and schools. We need to take a time out from funding this program.

20%

**In summary, Wisconsin voters overwhelmingly support continuing the Knowles Nelson Stewardship Program and restoring funding to past levels.** In tracking key questions from past surveys, we see that support for the Program has remained overwhelming despite the very different economic and budget circumstances today. Support is evident throughout the state and with key sub-groups, as well as remaining solid even after hearing differing viewpoints.