To: Governor Tony Evers  
Date: August 24, 2020  
Re: Support for long-term reauthorization of Wisconsin’s Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program

Dear Governor Evers:

We write to express our support for the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program (KNSP). As a coalition of 58 groups, representing environmental conservation, business interests, local governments, hunting, fishing, forestry, agriculture, and recreation, we recognize the tremendous positive impact that the Stewardship Program has on our health, our economy, and our priceless Wisconsin landscapes.

We support a 10-year reauthorization of the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program, and we respectfully urge you to restore the program’s funding in order to reverse the trend of cuts that have significantly reduced the buying power of the KNSP over the past decade.

The KNSP was created in 1989 to preserve valuable natural areas and wildlife habitat, protect water quality and fisheries, expand opportunities for outdoor recreation, and support our timber and tourism industries.

By any measure, the Stewardship Program has been a resounding success. Because of the KNSP, the Wisconsin DNR, local governments, and nonprofit conservation organizations have received state funds—which are matched with federal, local, and private dollars—to purchase public land
or easements for conservation and to support the upkeep and maintenance of our waterways, parks, forests, and trail systems.

Protected land in Wisconsin works for everyone’s benefit. Forests sequester carbon and clean our air. Wetlands filter our water and buffer against floods. These benefits can be quantified. A conservative estimate of the value of “natural infrastructure” on lands protected by KNSP is more than $2 billion per year.

And yet, the total investment in KNSP represents a small fraction of the state’s investments in traditional infrastructure projects. For example, we spend an average of $1.6 billion per year on the state trunk highway system. Over three decades, the state of Wisconsin has invested approximately $1.3 billion in the KNSP. We also continue to lag behind our neighbors Michigan and Minnesota in the amount of land that we protect and the financial resources we allocate to developing outdoor amenities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it abundantly clear that access to parks and open space — especially places close to home — is vital for the physical and mental health of Wisconsin residents. Over the history of the KNSP, more than 1,000 grants have been made to local governments to support green space purchases in our cities and towns as well as funding the trails and park amenities that help Wisconsinites get out and enjoy nature. But there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that all Wisconsin residents have convenient access to parks and open space. For example, more than 50,000 Milwaukee residents do not live within a 10-minute walk of a park, and in many smaller metro areas, like Eau Claire and Wisconsin Rapids, more than a third of residents do not live within walking distance of a park.

Time spent in nature increases one’s sense of well-being, improves one’s attention span, and decreases feelings of anxiety and depression. Regular exercise is one of the best treatments for chronic health conditions like obesity and high blood pressure, and access to open space close to home is a key factor in encouraging healthy exercise habits.

If the KNSP is not renewed as part of the 2021 state budget, we will lose Wisconsin’s best source of funding for land and water protection as well as funding for the development and maintenance of community parks and open spaces.

Planning and executing Stewardship projects can take years. Therefore, landowners, donors, nonprofits, and government agencies need certainty about the long-term future of the program in order for projects to be as strategic and successful as possible. That’s why we’re asking for a 10-year authorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program as had been the tradition since the program’s inception in 1989.

Polling demonstrates near universal public support for the KNSP, even in times of economic turmoil. Past surveys have shown that 93 percent of Wisconsin voters want to see the KNSP reauthorized. This includes 89% of Republicans, 90% of Independents, and 100% of Democrats.

Please support land and water conservation in Wisconsin by including a 10-year reauthorization of the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship Program in your budget and restoring funding that has been cut. We look forward to advocating for Stewardship with our legislators and speaking publicly about the many benefits that the program will provide for decades to come.