



## **Wisconsin's Best Bipartisan Success Story Is Being Held Hostage**

By Charles Carlin, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Gathering Waters: Wisconsin's Alliance for Land Trusts

*April 2026*

---

In Wisconsin, we take care of our land and water. It's part of who we are — lakes and rivers to fish, working forests up north, and trails close enough to home that you use them on a Tuesday evening. That tradition of stewardship didn't happen by accident. For the last 35 years, that commitment has been supported by one of the most successful conservation programs in the country: the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

Unless something changes before legislators leave Madison for the campaign trail, funding for Knowles-Nelson will lapse in June.

### **A Program Built on Common Ground**

Knowles-Nelson was created in 1989, named for Warren Knowles, a Republican governor, and Gaylord Nelson, a Democratic governor and the founder of Earth Day. The name itself is a statement of values: this is something we do together, across party lines, because conservation is a Wisconsin value.

For 35 years, the program has delivered. Grants have flowed to land trusts and local governments across the state to provide access for hunters and anglers, protect our working forests for wildlife and forest products, and build the parks and trails that make Wisconsin communities great places to live. The Ice Age Trail, Devil's Lake State Park, and the Lower Wisconsin Riverway have all been supported by Knowles-Nelson.

Knowles-Nelson polls at 93 percent support statewide. Even among the most conservative voters, support doesn't drop below 80 percent. There is almost no public policy in America that commands that kind of consensus. This is not a controversial program. It is one of the most popular things state government does.

### **So What Went Wrong?**

Knowles-Nelson has become a casualty of the partisan dysfunction that has consumed our state Capitol.

Funding for Knowles-Nelson has been steadily whittled away since 2011, and the program's purchasing power is down 80 percent. At the same time, demand for outdoor recreation is higher than ever and our parks, trails, and wildlife areas are feeling the strain.

This past February, a bill to fund Knowles-Nelson was pulled from the Wisconsin Senate floor despite the fact that many republicans supported the legislation as did all democrats. Compromise was possible, however, our legislative leaders chose partisan gridlock.

The result is that a program with near-universal public support is being used as a chess piece in partisan battles rather than as the vehicle for sound, popular conservation policy that it ought to be.

### **What Needs to Happen**

Wisconsin needs a clean, well-funded reauthorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. The reauthorization should happen before funding lapses in June. If not, legislators will need to hit the ground running in January 2027 to get the program running again. That means legislative leaders need to stop treating conservation as a bargaining chip and start treating it as the public trust it is.

The nonpartisan history of this program is not just a nice story. It is a model for how Wisconsin government is supposed to work: find the things that most people agree on, invest in them, and don't let the fringes hold the center hostage.

Wisconsin's land and water won't wait for partisan disputes to resolve themselves. Conservation opportunities often come up just once in a lifetime. If a wetland is filled in instead of protecting our homes from floods, it's difficult to get it back. Once open space becomes a housing development, it will never become a park. A stretch of wild shoreline stays wild only if we proactively move to conserve it.

With Knowles-Nelson, we've built something worth protecting. Let's get it done.

---

*Charlie Carlin is Director of Strategic Initiatives at Gathering Waters: Wisconsin's Alliance for Land Trusts, the statewide membership organization for Wisconsin's 40 nonprofit land trusts. He coordinates Team Knowles-Nelson, a coalition of more than 75 organizations advocating for reauthorization of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.*