

Policy changes proposed to Stewardship Program

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Efforts to preserve natural lands in northern Wisconsin may face more administrative hurdles under the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program through the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR). Even so, the land conservation community is praising Gov. Scott Walker for fully funding the program at \$86 million in his proposed budget.

Mike Carlson is the government relations director for the Gathering Waters Conservancy out of Madison, an organization that assists landowners and communities to preserve natural areas.

"We feel that the fact that the Stewardship Fund was maintained at \$86 million a year is extremely significant," Carlson said.

Carlson said they're working with partners within the land trust community to assess the impacts of policy changes under the governor's proposed budget.

"We want to work with the administration, DNR leadership and the Legislature to make sure the program remains effective and efficient," Carlson said.

Kurt Thiede is the administrator for the Land Division of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources out of Madison. He notes one of the changes proposed under the governor's budget is the elimination of payments for aids in lieu of taxes (PILT). The state typically compensates local governments for land acquisitions in exchange for the loss in property tax revenues. The WDNR paid out around \$11.6 million in PILT aids last year.

"Obviously, there's going to be a lot of communications and discussions taking place at the local level to determine does a Stewardship purchase still make sense in our community from the standpoint of how important economics would be as it relates to tourism and forestry and other aspects of the Stewardship Program," Thiede said.

He noted that communities in southern Wisconsin have highlighted nature-based activities and green space when attracting businesses to the region.

"That's what communities will have to weigh if this goes forward. Is there a benefit to their community economically that they could justify offsetting that loss of aid in lieu of taxes?" Thiede said.

As part of eliminating PILT aid under the governor's budget, local governments would have to pass a nonbinding resolution in support or opposition of a land purchase. The WDNR would have to factor in the outcome of the resolution before making any purchase final.

"It's their ability to have that discussion ... as to whether or not they're open to the idea of property coming off the tax roll in their community," Thiede said.

However, he said it would present a challenge to the DNR as to how that affects the acquisition process concerning land purchase negotiations.

Of the \$86 million in the Stewardship Fund, around \$50 million was set aside for DNR land acquisitions last year. The remaining funds are spread into various grant programs. For example, Thiede said \$12 million is allocated to nonprofit conservation organizations.

"What that is, is a match. That \$12 million typically becomes \$24 million when partners bring match whether it be federal funding or local funding from counties," he said.

Thiede said the use of those funds in partnership with organizations will be even more important moving forward.

"Nonprofits organizations typically will elect to keep that property on the tax roll. So it's really, when we're talking about the PILT, it's that bigger pot of money that the state purchases or acquires fee simple (obtain all rights to the land) that gets impacted," Thiede said.

The Bayfield Regional Conservancy is one nonprofit organization whose work may be negatively impacted

under the governor's budget. Ellen Kwiatkowski, executive director, said the mission of the nonprofit is to protect lands in Douglas, Bayfield, Ashland and Sawyer counties. To date, the conservancy has protected roughly 2,500 acres of land throughout the region.

"We do that in a couple of different ways through outright purchases of the land and through working with private landowners to place conservation easements on their properties to restrict how the land is used," said Kwiatkowski.

The conservancy has conducted 17 easements and 22 trail easements, as well as at least seven land purchases. She said their work would be most impacted by the elimination of purchasing conservation easements included in the governor's proposed budget.

"Right now we are in the process of working on a project with a landowner in Sawyer County on Callahan Lake," she said.

Kwiatkowski said that project would not move forward without funds for conservation easement purchases.

"We're really disappointed about that," she said, noting they had also hoped to purchase conservation easements on the Marengo River.

"We just completed a 270-acre conservation easement donation on the Marengo that includes two miles of river shoreline. That landowner donated an easement and our goal was to use that donation as a match to acquire other easements on the Marengo using the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship grant program, but now that (wouldn't) happen either."

Meanwhile, Gathering Waters' Carlson said conservation easements can be a more cost-effective tool for preserving lands in the state.

"It's a tool that typically includes purchasing the development rights off of a property, so protecting the property from being developed in the future," Carlson said. "But, you can also acquire other rights along with the conservation easement, such as public access."

Kwiatkowski agreed and noted that lands can be preserved at a fraction of the cost of acquiring them through conservation easements.

"It stays on the tax rolls and the DNR doesn't have to manage it. The landowner manages it so you're able to get a lot more accomplished with a lot less money," she said. "You would think that if money is really the issue than conservation easements would be allowed."

Kwiatkowski said landowners enter into a voluntary agreement to restrict how their property's used, noting existing pressures to develop near inland lakes in northern Wisconsin.

"Parcelization of inland lakeshore is a really big issue," she said. Kwiatkowski added rivers, streams and Lake Superior also face the highest pressure for recreational development or second homes.

Local governments face a delicate balancing act in northern Wisconsin, Kwiatkowski said.

"We don't want to sacrifice the health of our environment for money because I think that our quality of life and our personal health is directly related to our environmental health and environmental quality," she said.

In addition, she added the region's economy is dependent on forestry, agriculture and tourism.

"You don't want to over-develop and lose what it is that people value about the area," Kwiatkowski said.

On another note, working forest legacy easements would still receive high priority under the governor's budget, said WDNR's Thiede.

"Why that's significant is that a lot of these large tracks of commercial forests — rather than being subdivided and coming out of the timber harvest industry — those in the past have always been very profitable because what we're doing is basically purchasing the easement to keep that property as a working forest," Thiede said. "If this bill goes forward, we could potentially be looking at even more dollars going toward those programs if it turns out that local communities decide to pass non-binding resolutions that they don't necessarily want an acquisition in their area."

As for recreation on Stewardship lands, there are five nature-based outdoor activities that may be allowed: hiking, cross-country skiing, trapping, fishing and hunting. Currently, usership patterns are one factor considered when excluding activities on such lands. However, that provision would be eliminated under the governor's budget.

"In the event that it is to protect public safety or to protect a unique plant or animal habitat or species — those are the two reasons that any of those activities could be prohibited on a future stewardship purchase as I understand it," Thiede said.

While policy changes may move forward, Thiede said the take home message is that the WDNR, communities and organizations have the ability to purchase lands for conservation under the governor's proposed budget.

"We may have a few more administrative considerations as we administer the program over the next year," Thiede said. "But, I think we've already been able to figure out how to best move forward with the Stewardship Program and protecting our high-demand, high-quality properties."