



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON FORESTRY

Tony Evers, Governor

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The Honorable Tony Evers
Governor of Wisconsin
PO Box 7863
Madison, WI 53707

WORKING DRAFT

RE: Forestry Priorities for Wisconsin's 2025-2027 State Budget

Governor Evers,

On behalf of the Wisconsin Council on Forestry we would like to thank you for your administration's efforts to protect and maintain Wisconsin's vital forest products industry and forests. Funding for forestry programs in the State Budget are investments that support rural communities as well as the overall state economy. By keeping forests as forests, we can better address challenges from climate change, and foster the additional benefits that forests provide for clean water and air, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation.

We recognize the numerous decisions you need to make in developing the upcoming biennial budget. We urge you to maintain the essential investments in forestry programs that supports the forestry community ability to address threats to forest health and maintain and enhance a forest industry that directly and indirectly benefits every Wisconsin resident and visitor.

In 2017, when the Forestry Mill Tax ended, legislators promised to maintain forestry funding from GPR. It is imperative to continue this funding. The current GPR allocation to the **Forestry Account within the Conservation Fund supports** public safety and forestry-related programs including the **following critical functions:**

- Urban forestry grant program
- County forest sustainability and habitat grants
- Forest management activities on public lands
- Wildland fire control operations and support for rural fire departments
- Supporting family forest owners Managed Forest Law
- Forest nurseries, forest health and forest conservation activities
- Forest recreation, campgrounds, trails, and forest facilities
- Support for community tree programs
- Debt service for Knowles-Nelson Stewardship

The Council on Forestry feels strongly that the Department must support and actively advocate for the Division of Forestry operations and programs. Transfers from the Forestry SEG account to support non-forestry related programs are deeply concerning to the forestry community. Cuts to the Division of Forestry's supplies and services funding, as seen in the last budget, threatens the entire community's efforts to sustainably manage our forest resources.

In addition to maintaining funding for the critical functions listed above, the following are specific Council budget recommendations.

Council on Forestry 2025 – 2027 Budget Recommendations

- **Fund a new one-time appropriation in the Forestry SEG Account of \$1 million to facilitate the development of a Forest Industry-Wide Strategic Plan and Roadmap.** This Plan will build on existing projects that support innovation and workforce development and will position Wisconsin to anticipate and drive the demand of our 21st century wood fiber production with sustainable, innovative products to put the state at the top of global wood markets.
 - Grant position authority for the state agency charged with supporting the Forest Industry-Wide Strategic Plan and Roadmap steering committee for a project position to manage committee activities and provide administrative support. **Cost \$??**
- **Fund a limited-term employee with an annual cost of approximately \$71,000 within the Department of Forestry (similar to the Urban Forestry Council Liaison).** The position would facilitate the implementation of Council on Forestry actions, promote and market council initiatives, coordinate and facilitate council meetings and provide logistic support for the appointed volunteer Council members.
- **Increase DNR spending authority by \$500,000 annually to improve management of private forests through the Wisconsin Forest Landowner Grant Program (WFLGP).** This critical grant program supports reforestation, storm clean up, and other activities to improve forest health, sustainability, and productivity. Demand for this program exceeds current funding levels and increasing availability is an important strategy to meet Wisconsin's goals to maintain forest health in light of challenges with current wood markets for low grade fiber and threats to forest health. This increase can be made by adjusting annual spending authority within Wis. Stat. 20.370(5)(av) from \$1,147,900 to \$1,647,900.
- **Increase DNR spending authority by \$616,000 annually to support forest Education and Innovative Curriculum Development through the UW-Stevens Point College of Natural Resources Wisconsin Forestry Center (WFC) and LEAF to keep pace with an ever-evolving forest industry.** Of the numerous challenges facing Wisconsin's forest industry, workforce recruitment and training remain among the most pressing. This funding will build upon the well-established programs developed by LEAF to develop and support teachers to effectively teach elementary through high school aged students about Wisconsin's forests and ensure sustainability of the WFC. This increase can be made by adjusting annual spending authority within Wis. Stat. 20.370(2)(cu) from \$350,000 to \$966,000 and modify Wis. Stat. 26.39(2) as needed to allow for this authority to also be used for innovative curriculum development.
- **Restore from the Forestry SEG account the Division of Forestry's 2023 – '25 biennial budget cut of \$xxx annually in funding for supplies and services. xxxxxx**
- **Increase DNR spending authority to support Wisconsin's County Forests by \$630,000 annually for the County Forest Administration grant, Sustainable Forestry grant and Wildlife Habitat grant and fund an additional 6,000 DNR Division of Forestry hours annually for work on county forests by increasing the DNR's position**

authority by 3.5 full time positions. (?? \$94K per year per FTE) Wisconsin’s county forests manage over 2.4 million acres of forests, the largest public ownership in Wisconsin. County forests are a major contributor to public land management and rural economic development in the State, and are highly valued because they provide reliable source of raw materials for the forest products industry, as well as a tremendous amount of recreation opportunities and abundant wildlife habitat.

- **Increase funding by \$xxxx annually to support the Division of Forestry information technology (IT) needs and the Wisconsin Forest Inventory and Reporting System (WisFIRS).** WisFIRS is critical to manage core business functions for public and private forest management, serving hundreds of DNR staff as well as partners including county foresters and private consulting foresters. WisFIRS application enables foresters and habitat managers to store data collected in the field, plan for and track completed treatments report accomplishments and calculate the financial aspects of those treatments. Geographical information systems (GIS) is integrated in the application to identify where on the landscape practices are being done. WisFIRS also enables foresters to administer and manage Wisconsin’s forest tax law programs on private lands.

Requested Biennial Budget Increase Summary

Program Description	\$ Amount	Spend Description
Forest Industry-Wide Strategic Plan and Roadmap	\$750,000.00	One time from Forestry SEG Account
Forest Industry-Wide Strategic Plan and Roadmap Committee Position Support	\$	Annually for duration of project anticipated to be approximately 3 years
Council on Forester Support Position	\$?
Wisconsin Forest Landowner Grant Program	\$500,000.00	Annual - Increase DNR spending authority
UWSP LEAF and WI Forestry Center	\$616,000.00	Annual - Increase DNR spending authority
Division of Forestry Supplies and Services	\$?
WI County Forests Grants	\$630,000.00	Annual - Increase DNR spending authority
WI County Forests DNR Support -Staff Hours Increase	\$?
Division of Forestry WisFIRS IT Support	\$?

Budget Summary

- **One time spend sum: \$**
- **Annual DNR spending authority increase sum: \$**
- **xxx**

While specific budget requirements are not known at this time, the Council also recognizes the value and the need to establish support and related funding for the following items:

- Support for tree planting as part of the **Global Trillion Trees Initiative**, including tree nursery capacity.
- Efforts to maintain healthy forests and mitigate dangers associated with declining forests due to **pests and invasive species** as noted in the Council’s **position paper on forest health (weblink)**, including:
 - Increase capacity at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for forest health management and research.
 - Increase capacity at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection for forest pest inspections, surveys and response.
 - Support private woodland owners through expansion of the Wisconsin Forest Landowner Grant Program

- Develop a strategic forest industry plan to facilitate this industry's significant contributions to maintaining vigorous and healthy forests
- Support for the **Agricultural Road Improvement Program (ARIP)**. Healthy forests depend on a healthy forest products industry, and a healthy industry requires an efficient and effective transportation infrastructure.


In addition, the Council also supports extension of the **Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program** beyond June 2026 at the current funding level of \$33.25 million annually for four years, consistent with the previous extension in 2022.

The members you have appointed to the Wisconsin Council on Forestry reflect a broad spectrum of sectors and interests throughout our state. We hope that in your budget deliberations you will carefully consider the important role forests play in contributing to the quality of life for Wisconsin residents, and a way of life for the over 60,000 full-time workers and their families who make their living from our forests.

We welcome the opportunity to follow up with you and your staff with regard to these recommendations and the important investments they represent.

With best regards,

Tom Hittle



Wisconsin Council on Forestry Chair

*Please note that due to the nature of their public positions, Council members Representatives Jeffrey Mursau and Katrina Shankland, Senators Romaine Quinn and Jeff Smith, State Forester Heather Berklund, and Chequamegon Nicolet National Forest Supervisor Jenn Youngblood abstain as signatories.