

Gov. Evers: Proposes investments in conservation, state parks, and outdoor recreation

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WAUSAU — Gov. Tony Evers today, ahead of Earth Day on Saturday, will visit Rib Mountain State Park in Wausau and highlight several initiatives in his 2023-25 biennial budget proposal, as well as his 2023-25 Capital Budget recommendations, to support conservation efforts across the state, bolster Wisconsin's state parks and public lands, and promote the state's \$8.7 billion outdoor recreation industry.

“Our park system and public lands are the gems of our state, and no matter where you go in Wisconsin, you're never very far from a state park or trail,” said Gov. Evers. “That's because conservation and outdoor recreation are core to who we are as a people and a state, and my budget makes targeted investments to ensure our natural resources are available to be enjoyed today, tomorrow, and for generations yet to come.”

Gov. Evers' 2023-25 biennial budget proposal makes several key investments to increase funding and staff for the state park system and support for park building projects and facility upgrades. According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), more than 584,000 visitors camped in Wisconsin State Parks and more than 19.6 million people visited the State Park System in 2022. The governor is directing more than \$30.5 million for the State Parks System, including more than \$21 million for capital development projects, more than \$2 million to hire additional limited-term employees (LTE) and contract services to support the state park system, and \$2.9 million to electrify campsites in state parks and forests. The governor's 2023-25 Capital Budget Recommendations included more than \$48.2 million for 23 major projects at state parks and properties across the state.

Additionally, annual data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis showed Wisconsin's outdoor recreation industry contributed a record-setting [\\$8.7 billion](#) to the state's gross domestic product in 2021, and Wisconsin's outdoor economy grew by 14.1 percent—more than three times faster than the state's overall economy, which grew by 4.6 percent. Gov. Evers created the [Office of Outdoor Recreation](#) at the Wisconsin Department of Tourism in 2019 to serve as a central hub for Wisconsin's outdoor recreation industry, working with stakeholders and providing resources to bolster Wisconsin as a top outdoor recreation destination. The governor's 2023-25 biennial budget proposal would make this Office permanent by providing \$1.1 million and three full-time positions to continue expanding the state's growing outdoor recreation market.

Another critical program in the conservation and preservation of public lands is the state's Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, which was created in 1989. For decades, this program has supported the acquisition of hundreds of thousands of acres of land, including natural areas, fisheries and streambank protection, forests, and wildlife management. Under the 2021-23 biennial budget signed by Gov. Evers, the stewardship program was reauthorized for another four years with an annual allocation of more than \$33 million. The governor's 2023-25 biennial budget builds on the success of the stewardship program by increasing transparency in the stewardship program process to ensure these critical projects are not unnecessarily delayed. Specifically, the budget includes a provision requiring that if a member of the Legislature objects to a proposed Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program project approval, that member's name and nature of the objection be shared publicly, among other changes.

More information regarding the governor's 2023-25 biennial budget investments to support conservation efforts across the state, bolster Wisconsin's state parks and public lands, and promote the state's outdoor recreation industry is available below.

Supporting and Enjoying Wisconsin State Parks

Wisconsin is home to many natural wonders that can be explored and enjoyed throughout the State Park System at 50 state parks, 44 state trails, 15 state forests, nine state recreational areas, and eight river and resource areas. Gov. Evers is committed to protecting these resources and expanding access to the state's natural resources for Wisconsinites of all ages and abilities by providing: \$292,700 for operations costs in the Menominee River State Recreation Area, Sauk Prairie State Recreation Area, Lizard Mound State Park, Mazomanie Day Use Area, State Ice Age Trail Areas, and the Brule River State Forest Cabin; \$21.8 million for

capital development projects in the state park system; \$700,000 to implement a maintenance plan for mobile equipment in the state park system; \$676,000 to expand DNR's online vehicle admission sales system to include trail pass sales and provide for ongoing operations of the online system in a new, continuing appropriation; \$330,000 to expand accessible outdoor recreation opportunities in the state park system; \$487,200 for the DNR to provide fee waivers for annual admissions receipts to state parks for the families of fourth graders; \$305,000 in one-time funding for technology upgrades in the state park system and \$58,800 for credit card terminal security software; More than \$2.9 million in one-time funding to electrify campsites in state parks and forests; More than \$2.1 million to hire additional LTEs and contract services to support the state park system; and Increasing funding for utility expenses in the state park system by \$431,900 in fiscal year 2023-24 and \$440,600 in fiscal year 2024-25. **Investing in State Park**

Infrastructure

The governor is proposing a more than \$48.2 million investment through his 2023-25 Capital Budget Recommendations for the DNR to make facility upgrades, accessibility improvements, and replacement and repairs across the State Park System. This investment includes:

More than \$6 million for the Potawatomi State Park-Observation tower; New campground bathroom facilities and upgrades at Rocky Arbor State Park and Governor Dodge State Park; \$7.8 million for a dam reconstruction project at Pattison State Park; Repairs to the Stewart Tunnel on the Badger State Trail; More than \$4.7 million for an addition to the Wausau Service Center near Rib Mountain State Park; Fire Response Ranger Station Replacement and equipment facilities at the Lemay Forestry Center, Crandon Ranger Station, and Friendship Ranger Station; and Visitor entrance replacements at Peninsula State Park and Buckhorn State Park. The governor's recommendations also include more than \$14 million to repair, replace, or renovate water and wastewater infrastructure statewide on DNR properties. More information regarding the governor's 2023-25 Capital Budget Recommendations is available [here](#).

Establishing the Office of Outdoor Recreation

The governor is proposing an investment of \$1.1 million and three full-time positions to make the Department of Tourism's Office of Outdoor Recreation a permanent office to continue their work to expand the state's growing outdoor recreation market and work with outdoor partners, brands, and industries.

Increasing Transparency in Stewardship

Gov. Evers' 2023-25 biennial budget works to increase transparency in the state's stewardship program to ensure these critical projects are not unnecessarily delayed by:

Repealing the arbitrary requirement that all Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program projects north of Highway 64 be subject to legislative review; Increasing the threshold for legislative review of Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program grants and acquisitions from \$250,000 to \$500,000; and Requiring that if a member of the Legislature objects to a proposed Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program project approval, that member's name and nature of the objection be announced publicly. An online version of this release is available [here](#).