

Lawmakers debate pared-back stewardship reauthorization ahead of June funding lapse

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A pair of GOP lawmakers urged passage of their proposal to extend the state's stewardship program for two years before funding lapses in June amid an ongoing battle for support from both sides of the political aisle.

Co-authors Sen. Patrick Testin, R-Stevens Point, and Rep. Tony Kurtz, R-Wonewoc, at yesterday's Senate Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage Committee hearing emphasized the challenges of addressing various concerns related to renewing the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

Testin said he and Kurtz have "run into buzzsaws from every side of the aisle, every corner of our prospective caucuses."

"I think we've landed in a good spot. Now, is it perfect? I'll be the first to admit that this is not a perfect bill," Testin said.

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SB 316 and SB 685 originally sought to extend the stewardship program for four years, until mid-2030. Both the bills approved in the Assembly last month and the substitute amendments would extend the program to mid-2028 instead. The package would also significantly cut back land acquisitions.

Testin and Kurtz said they are entertaining conversations about further changes to the legislation. They noted concerns related to private land parcels surrounded by public land and about land acquisitions by nonprofit conservation groups.

Sen. Jodi Habush Sinkyin, D-Whitefish Bay, criticized the stripping back of land

acquisitions and the reduction of overall funding for the program from \$33.25 million to \$28.25 million annually.

The current stewardship program designates \$16 million annually for land acquisition, while the proposed package includes \$1 million to be set aside for land along the Ice Age Trail. The package also includes \$250,000 annually for acquisitions of 5 acres or less that improve access to hunting, fishing or trapping opportunities and are contiguous to land already owned by the state.

Habush Sinykin noted the program was originally created to acquire land for recreational purposes and to protect environmentally sensitive areas.

“When does this program stop being the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program or just in name only if the guts and the core of it has been removed by a lack of support?” Habush Sinykin said.

Testin acknowledged the total dollar amount is much lower than both the \$100 million Gov. Tony Evers proposed and the \$72 million in Habush Sinykin’s bill to renew the program. He said the total authors agreed upon, “to be honest with you, is what is politically palatable for a number of our colleagues in both houses.”

Under the bills, the bulk of the money in the program over the next two years would be used to improve nature-based recreation facilities. The package also would require the Department of Natural Resources to do an inventory of land in the program, along with land acquisition priorities for the next two to five years.

Wisconsin Wildlife Federation Executive Director Cody Kamrowski noted the group had withdrawn its support of the bills due to the substitute amendments and changes to land acquisitions.

“At its foundation, Knowles-Nelson is a land-first program. Land acquisition is not incidental, it is what makes public access, habitat protection and outdoor opportunity possible in the state of Wisconsin,” Kamrowski said, noting those issues are particularly important in faster-growing areas of the state.

Sen. John Jagler, R-Watertown, said that opposition holding out for more changes to the legislation “is going to doom this program.”

“I encourage anybody with a down arrow as a registration on this to change that to sideways because the more ‘no’ votes you bring by opposition to it dooms your very

efforts,” Jagler said.

Habush Sinykin later said that according to Legislative Council, if the program did lapse, it could be reauthorized because the existing statutory language and framework for the program would remain even if funding ran out.

“That is not what we’re working for. I just want to give all of you the opportunity to understand the big picture that it’s not all or nothing,” she said.