**Fiscal Facts:**  **State Land Purchase Program Facing Fiscal Pressures as Deadline Approaches**

As Wisconsin’s main state land conservation program marks its 30th anniversary this year, it spent the lowest amount ever on land purchases last year.

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program spent $2.9 million for Department of Natural Resources (DNR) land acquisitions in fiscal year 2018, well below a 2007 peak of $61.6 million. At the same time, the program’s annual costs – mainly payments on debt – remain near their 2014 peak.

After months of uncertainty about the program’s future, it appears likely to get a two-year extension after lawmakers on the Legislature’s budget-writing committee voted for one similar to what was proposed by Gov. Tony Evers.

From its enactment in 1989 through June 30, 2020, the Stewardship program has been authorized to borrow as much as $1.3 billion. As of June 30, 2018, the state had made $865 million in debt payments to cover principal and interest on program bonds. Currently, the state has $546.1 million in principal outstanding on the bonds plus $168.1 million in interest.

The Stewardship program aims to preserve Wisconsin’s environmentally sensitive lands, waters, and wildlife habitats and to promote outdoor recreation. Stewardship funds aid local government and nonprofit organization land purchases, as well as construction or renovation projects on public lands such as parks, trails, piers, and harbors. Over the life of the program, DNR has purchased land or acquired easements on 826,231 acres.

Without action by lawmakers and the governor to reauthorize the Stewardship program, it would expire on June 30, 2020. The proposed two-year extension of the program will be debated as part of the full state budget, which the Legislature could take up as early as June 25.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at wispolicyforum.org.*