**State's largest conservation deal ever occurs via a work-around by Gov. Tony Evers** By WisPolitics.com  
  
Democratic Gov. Tony Evers has put the final touches on the largest conservation deal in state history with an agreement that takes steps to address concerns that were raised when GOP  lawmakers ejected state money for it nine months ago.  
  
Last spring, the GOP-controlled Joint Finance Committee voted along party lines to reject a Department of Natural Resources request for $4 million in state stewardship funds to pay for the easement in the Pelican River Forest.  
  
At the time, Republicans were incensed that the agency had failed to tell the Natural Resources Board that Sugar Camp and the Town of Monico, two communities in the project area, had voted to oppose it before the board signed off on seeking state money for the project.  
  
State Sen. Mary Felzkowski, R-Tomahawk, also had concerns over how much land in her northern Wisconsin district the state was gobbling up. She told the committee the state had 5.9 million acres that it either owns or has an easement on to preserve the property. The three counties along the Pelican River Project — Oneida, Forest and Langlade — accounted for 1.9 million of that. She said for northern Wisconsin to be economically viable, it has to have opportunities to grow, including people being able to buy land and build homes.  
  
The new deal takes some steps to address that issue, according to The Conservation Fund, which has owned the property since October 2021. The plan last spring was to put $4 million in stewardship money toward an overall price tag of $15.5 million, with the rest of the cost covered through federal matching grants, gifts and donations.  
  
Clint Miller, the project manager and Central Midwest regional director, tells WisPolitics the group decided to sell the easement to the state for $11 million, essentially the cost of the federal grant  
that Evers touted in his speech as the vehicle to cover the price tag. The group decided to raise private funds equal to the state money it was passing up to offset the lower price tag, Miller said. The group also pulled about 1,400 acres out of the easement in the Town of Monico to address the concern of local officials that land would be shielded from development.  
  
Miller said The Conservation Fund continues to own the land, which is along U.S. 8 and 45, and the group or a future owner would have the option to sell it for development. The easement is one example of a way Evers has found to go around the GOP-controlled state Legislature on his priorities.

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