

Pelican River Forest Conservation Project Takes Shape

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DNR takes final action to protect more than 54,000 acres of forest in one of the largest forest conservation efforts in state history.

MADISON — During his 2024 State of the State address Tuesday, Gov. Tony Evers [announced](#) the approval of an additional conservation easement covering 54,898 acres of the Pelican River Forest to complete one of the largest conservation projects in Wisconsin history. Today, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and [The Conservation Fund](#) have submitted all final documents to complete the acquisition of the conservation easement for the remaining acres. Altogether, over 67,000 acres of the Pelican River Forest will be protected, ensuring the forest will remain open to the public in perpetuity for outdoor recreation activities such as fishing, hunting, skiing, trapping, and hiking.



“I was glad to announce during my State of the State address that we were moving forward to approve one of the largest conservation projects in our state’s history, and I am proud that

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today we're getting it done," said Gov. Evers. "Conserving and protecting our natural resources and land continues to be a top priority for me, and I thank the DNR, The Conservation Fund, and our federal partners for getting this done despite inexplicable partisan obstruction."

The conservation easement is funded by a grant from the U.S. Forestry Service Forest Legacy Program (FLP) and is expected to have positive benefits on the local and regional economy, including minimal to no impact on property tax revenues and maintaining high timber harvest and tourism revenues. Conserving the Pelican River Forest also makes significant progress towards Gov. Evers' [Trillion Trees Pledge](#), which includes conserving 125,000 acres of forestland by 2030. According to the DNR, the Pelican River Forest conservation easements will achieve 55 percent of the governor's goal

"This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to protect nearly 70,000 acres of forestland provides greater access to nature, strengthens local economies, and enhances climate resiliency," said Clint Miller, central Midwest regional director at The Conservation Fund. "The Conservation Fund and its partners are very grateful to the Richard King Mellon Foundation for their bridge financing loan and for the individual, foundation, and corporate support that helped provide a match for federal Forest Legacy Program funds—including a \$600,000 lead grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through Walmart's Acres for America Program. Because so many worked so tirelessly to get this project done, Pelican River Forest will stand tall for generations to come."

The Pelican River Forest conservation project has broad support from local governments, Native Nations, outdoor advocacy groups, local businesses, and thousands of individual Wisconsinites. The approved acreage under this conservation easement has been modified to address concerns from one local town in the Pelican River Forest footprint to accommodate future economic development growth and align with their comprehensive land use plan. All other townships within the footprint of the easement have language in their land use plans in support of industrial forest and recreational opportunities as an important component of their long-term vision.

In April 2023, Republicans on the Joint Committee on Finance voted to prevent the use of Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program funding to complete the conservation easement after months of inaction and obstruction. In response to this and other instances of abuses of power by Republicans, in October, Gov. Evers and Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul [filed a lawsuit](#) against Republicans in the Wisconsin State Legislature for obstructing basic government functions, including the blocking of conservation projects through the Stewardship Program. Despite attempts from Republicans to block this project, the Evers Administration has continued to work cooperatively with The Conservation Fund to complete the conservation easement and protect these valuable lands.

The Pelican River Forest conservation easement will:

- Protect 58 miles of rivers and streams and 22,334 acres of wetlands;

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- Protect more than seven miles of Class I and II designated cold-water trout streams;
- Ensure the land remains forested and is sustainably managed as a working forest;

- The property is third-party certified under the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, adhering to strict social and environmental standards.

- Store approximately 19 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (MTCO₂e);
- Annually, it is estimated the property will sequester 125,000 MTCO₂e over the first five years of management.

- Permanently secure public access and open 56 miles of roads designated for motorized vehicle use;
- Connect important snowmobile/ATV/UTV trail routes to Oneida County's 1,100-mile trail network; and
- Protect the headwaters of the Wolf River, which supplies clean drinking water to over 40,000 people who live downstream in cities and towns like Wausau, Merrill, Keshena, and New London.