

# Diversifying Funding for Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources

## Executive Summary

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) faces a critical juncture in its financial sustainability. Historically reliant on hunting and fishing licenses, its funding model is increasingly vulnerable to demographic shifts and unpredictable federal support. This report analyzes the DNR's existing non-hunting license revenue streams and proposes innovative mechanisms to secure a more resilient financial future. Key findings indicate that while some alternative funding exists, it is insufficient to meet broadening conservation needs, particularly for non-game species. Significant federal budget cuts to environmental agencies further underscore the imperative for state-level diversification. Recommendations include aggressive advocacy for federal legislation like the Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA), implementing new state-level user-pay models such as a broad-based habitat stamp, enhancing non-consumptive user engagement, and fostering public-private partnerships. A multi-faceted approach is essential to ensure predictable, sustainable funding for comprehensive natural resource stewardship, safeguarding Wisconsin's diverse ecosystems and wildlife for generations.

## 1. Introduction: The Evolving Landscape of Conservation Finance in Wisconsin

- **Current Funding Model: Reliance on Consumptive User Fees and the Conservation Fund** The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) primarily finances its extensive resource management programs through the Conservation Fund, a segregated trust fund established under state statute. This fund is meticulously divided into various program-specific accounts, including those dedicated to wildlife and fish management, forestry, state parks, and endangered resources, ensuring that revenues are directed to their intended purposes. A substantial portion of the Conservation Fund's revenue, particularly for the critical Fish and Wildlife Account, is derived from fees associated with hunting, fishing, and various specialized licenses and stamps. This dependency is clearly illustrated by the fact that resident and nonresident deer gun licenses alone contributed \$12.674 million in fiscal year 2021-22, accounting for 17.4% of the total revenue for the Fish and Wildlife Account. Beyond direct license sales, the Conservation Fund also receives revenue from related activities, such as stumpage from timber sales conducted on state habitat and wildlife areas, fees collected from hunter education and safety programming, and penalties and assessments levied for violations of fish and game laws. While this traditional funding model has proven effective in sustaining game species management for decades, its significant reliance on a specific demographic of outdoor users introduces a structural vulnerability. This concentration of funding means that the DNR's financial health is intrinsically linked to participation rates in hunting and fishing activities. Should these rates decline due to demographic shifts, changing recreational preferences, or economic pressures, the core funding for wildlife management could become unstable. This situation implies that the financial capacity to manage all wildlife, including non-game species or broader ecosystem health that do not directly benefit hunters and anglers, may be disproportionately borne by a segment of the population, potentially leading to underfunding for broader conservation needs that benefit all citizens.
- **The Imperative for Diversification: Federal Funding Shifts and Broadening Conservation Needs** The stability of federal funding for state wildlife agencies, historically a cornerstone of conservation finance, has become increasingly precarious.

While federal support for state wildlife agencies is often channeled through excise taxes on hunting, recreational shooting, and angling equipment via programs like Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson, disbursing over \$1.3 billion nationally in FY2025, broader federal support for environmental research and conservation agencies has faced significant challenges. Recent years have seen substantial budget cuts, staff reductions, and policy shifts impacting key federal environmental and scientific agencies, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These reductions have curtailed critical research, enforcement capacity, and direct grant programs, compelling states like Wisconsin to assume greater responsibility for conservation. For example, the USFWS experienced "budget reductions" and "diminished capacity", and the USGS Ecosystems Mission Area faced proposed elimination of programs and potential layoffs of 1,000 employees. This "diminished federal agency capacity" and "historical unreliability of federal protections subject to political change" underscore the urgent need for states like Wisconsin to act autonomously and secure dedicated funding streams. Without intervention, these cuts reduce the ability of regulatory bodies to implement long-term conservation strategies grounded in the best available science. This external pressure from federal funding instability creates a compelling and urgent imperative for the Wisconsin DNR to proactively develop and implement robust, state-controlled funding mechanisms. The consistent pattern of federal budget cuts and policy shifts across multiple environmental and scientific agencies establishes a clear causal link between federal withdrawal and increased financial burden on state DNRs. This situation compels Wisconsin to develop a more "holistic, balanced, and interdisciplinary scientific framework for wildlife stewardship, free from the constraints and inadequacies of a diminishing and scientifically limited federal role". This implies a strategic shift towards greater state-level financial independence and capacity-building, not just to supplement federal funds, but to proactively lead conservation efforts, particularly for species like the gray wolf, which have experienced "unstable population trends" and "diminishing federal oversight". Beyond financial instability, the scope of conservation is expanding to encompass not only game species but also a vast array of non-game species, critical habitat restoration, adaptation to climate change impacts, and proactive human-wildlife conflict mitigation, needs that traditional hunting license revenues alone cannot adequately address.

## **2. Existing Alternative Funding Streams for the Wisconsin DNR**

- **Federal Grant Programs: Leveraging National Conservation Initiatives** Beyond the foundational Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson programs, which are funded by excise taxes on sporting goods, the Wisconsin DNR actively administers other federal grant programs that provide significant financial support. These include the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and the Recreational Trails Program (RTP), both of which offer financial assistance for public outdoor recreation opportunities. LWCF grants typically provide a 50% cost-share to state, tribal, and local governments for projects such as land acquisition and the development of water-based recreation facilities. The Outdoor Recreation Legacy Program (ORLP), a competitive grant program also funded through LWCF, specifically targets urban areas to provide new or improved recreation opportunities. The RTP, funded by federal gas excise taxes on off-highway vehicles, supports the development and maintenance of recreational trails for both motorized and non-motorized uses. The State Wildlife Grant (SWG) Program, established in 2000, provides federal funds to states for the conservation of all wildlife and their habitats, including non-hunted or non-fished species. These grants require a non-federal match, typically 25-35% of project costs, which the state must provide. While these federal grant programs contribute significantly to the DNR's funding, their "annual availability...depends

on the federal budget process". This inherent unpredictability, coupled with the broader context of federal budget cuts, means that while these grants are valuable, they cannot form the sole or primary basis of a stable funding strategy. The matching fund requirement for SWG further emphasizes the need for robust state-level funding to even unlock these federal dollars. This situation implies that the DNR must continue to strategically pursue and maximize these federal grant opportunities, but simultaneously recognize their susceptibility to political and budgetary shifts at the national level.

- **Voluntary Contributions: Harnessing Public Support** The DNR benefits from several voluntary contribution mechanisms that tap into broader public support for conservation. The Endangered Resources Account, a specific program account within the Conservation Fund, is primarily sustained through a voluntary income tax check-off program, allowing individuals and corporations to donate via their tax returns. Sales of Endangered Resources license plates also provide substantial revenue. In fiscal year 2023, these plates generated \$478,005 for endangered resources conservation. When combined with tax form donations and state matching funds, these sources have historically accounted for as much as 40% of the total funding for endangered species conservation in some years. Additional voluntary contributions come from private donations and the sale of specific permits, such as wild ginseng harvest licenses and wild rice harvesting permits. The Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin's "Cherish Wisconsin Outdoors Fund" also receives voluntary contributions when individuals purchase licenses or registrations. The consistent revenue from Endangered Resources license plates and the tax check-off program clearly demonstrate a segment of the public's willingness to voluntarily contribute to conservation efforts that extend beyond traditional hunting and fishing. This indicates an existing, albeit niche, market for non-consumptive conservation funding. However, even at 40% of endangered species funding, the absolute dollar amount is relatively modest compared to the overall DNR budget. This implies that while these voluntary mechanisms are vital for specific programs and serve as a strong indicator of public support for non-game conservation, they are unlikely to generate the scale of funding required for comprehensive, statewide natural resource management. This suggests that while valuable, they must be complemented by more systematic and potentially broader-based revenue streams.
- **Other State-Level Non-License Revenues** The Conservation Fund receives various other non-license revenues that contribute to its overall financial health. These include stumpage revenues from timber sales conducted on state habitat and wildlife areas, as well as fees collected for hunter education and safety programming. A consistent and dedicated funding source for the Fish and Wildlife account is an annual transfer of \$3 million from tribal gaming revenue. Penalties and assessments levied for violations of fish and game laws also contribute to the Conservation Fund, reinforcing enforcement efforts. Furthermore, certain dedicated accounts within the Conservation Fund, such as the Boat Registration Account, the All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) and Utility Terrain Vehicle (UTV) Account, and the Snowmobile Account, receive 1% of the sales tax revenue collected from the purchases of their respective equipment. This represents an existing, albeit limited, application of sales tax revenue to conservation. Real estate transactions, such as gifts of land or conservation easements, can also provide long-term conservation benefits by adding to the DNR's land base and protected areas, while offering potential tax advantages for donors. While these "other" revenue sources are diverse in origin and demonstrate a multi-faceted approach to funding, with the exception of the \$3 million tribal gaming transfer, specific annual amounts are not consistently provided, suggesting that many of these sources, while valuable, are either smaller in scale, variable, or tied to specific, non-scalable activities. This indicates that while these existing non-license revenues contribute to the DNR's financial resilience, they do not collectively address the

significant funding gap or the imperative for broader diversification.

**Table 1: Wisconsin DNR Conservation Fund Accounts and Key Non-License Revenue Sources (FY2023-2025)**

Conservation Fund Account	Key Non-License Revenue Sources	Approximate Annual Revenue (where available)
Fish and Wildlife	Timber Sales from state habitat/wildlife areas	Not specified
	Hunter Education/Safety Fees	Not specified
	Tribal Gaming Transfer	\$3,000,000
	Penalty Assessments (Fish & Game laws)	Not specified
	Voluntary Contributions (Cherish WI Outdoors Fund)	Not specified
	Commercial Fish Propagation & Great Lakes Protection Surcharge	Not specified
	Voluntary Lake Research / AIS Control Contribution	Not specified
Forestry	Timber Sales from state forest lands	Not specified
	Sale of stock from state tree nurseries	Not specified
	Camping and entrance fees at state forests	Not specified
	Severance/withdrawal payments (county/private forests)	Not specified
Parks	Admission Stickers (motor vehicle)	Not specified
	Campsite Fees	Not specified
	Golf Fees (e.g., Peninsula State Park)	Not specified
	Pool Fees (e.g., Blue Mound State Park)	Not specified
	Trail User Fees	Not specified
	Rents, Sales, and Services	Not specified
Water Resources	Motorboat Fuel Tax Transfer	Not specified
Boat Registration	Motorized Boat Registrations	Not specified
	1% of sales tax from boat purchases	Not specified
ATV/UTV	ATV/UTV Registrations	Not specified
	ATV/UTV Fuel Tax Transfer	Not specified
	1% of sales tax from ATV/UTV purchases	Not specified
Off-Highway Motorcycle (OHM)	Annual/Five-Day Nonresident Trail Passes	Not specified
	OHM Registration Fees (GPR transfer)	Not specified

Conservation Fund Account	Key Non-License Revenue Sources	Approximate Annual Revenue (where available)
Snowmobile	Snowmobile Fuel Tax Transfer	Not specified
	Snowmobile Registrations	Not specified
	1% of sales tax from snowmobile purchases	Not specified
Endangered Resources	Voluntary Income Tax Check-Off	Not specified (matched by GPR up to \$950k)
	Endangered Resources License Plate Sales	\$478,005 (FY2023)
	Private Donations	Not specified
	Sale of wild ginseng harvest/dealer licenses	Not specified
	Sale of wild rice harvesting permits	Not specified
Natural Resources Magazine	Subscriptions, single-copy, insert sales	Not specified
General Conservation Fund	Investment Income	Not specified
	Various Safety Course Fees	Not specified
	Handling Fees for license issuance	Not specified

*Note: "Not specified" indicates that a specific annual revenue amount for that source was not available in the provided research material for FY2023-2025, though the source is confirmed to exist within the Conservation Fund structure.*

#### 4. Innovative Funding Proposals: Expanding the Revenue Horizon

- Dedicated Wildlife Stamps: The Wisconsin Conservation Congress Proposals**

The Wisconsin Conservation Congress (WCC) serves as a vital public input mechanism, advising the Natural Resources Board and DNR on natural resource issues. This process offers a direct avenue for public engagement on new funding concepts. During the 2025 Spring Hearing, a proposal for a \$5 annual habitat stamp garnered substantial public support, with a majority of voters in numerous counties across Wisconsin (including Adams, Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Brown, Columbia, Dane, Door, Douglas, Dunn, Green, Milwaukee, Saint Croix, and Shawano) casting "Yes" votes. Proponents estimated this stamp could generate over \$5 million annually, specifically earmarked for upland, warm water lakes, and streams habitat projects. Crucially, this initiative was designed to enable non-consumptive users, such as hikers, birdwatchers, canoeists, and kayakers, to contribute financially to conservation efforts, thereby broadening the funding base beyond traditional consumptive users. Another significant proposal from the WCC was a Sandhill Crane Stamp, intended to provide financial assistance to farmers for mitigating crop damage caused by cranes through seed treatment. This initiative also received strong public backing, with 69% of voters expressing support. However, despite this clear public mandate, the Wisconsin Conservation Congress ultimately rejected the proposal, preventing its formal advancement for policy consideration by the DNR. This outcome highlights a critical disconnect between public sentiment and the political/advisory mechanisms designed to translate that sentiment into policy. Wisconsin currently has an established framework for species-specific stamps, as pheasant, waterfowl, and wild turkey hunters are already required to purchase such stamps. The strong public support for new stamp programs, juxtaposed with the WCC's rejection of one, reveals that while public willingness to contribute to non-consumptive conservation is robust, the political

- and legislative pathways for implementation remain a significant challenge.
- **"Recovering America's Wildlife Act" (RAWA): A Transformative Federal Opportunity for Non-Game Wildlife** The Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA) represents a bipartisan federal legislative proposal with the potential to fundamentally transform wildlife conservation funding across the United States. This landmark legislation aims to dedicate \$1.3 billion annually to state, territorial, and District of Columbia fish and wildlife agencies specifically for the implementation of their State Wildlife Action Plans. An additional \$97.5 million would be allocated to tribal wildlife conservation efforts. The proposed funding mechanism for RAWA involves redirecting existing revenues generated from energy development on the outer continental shelf, which currently flow into the U.S. Treasury. This innovative approach is designed to avoid impacting existing Pittman-Robertson or Dingell-Johnson funds, thereby creating a new, dedicated, and non-excite tax revenue stream for conservation. RAWA is critically needed because current federal programs, such as the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants, provide only a fraction (approximately 4.65%) of the estimated \$1.3 billion annually required to effectively implement State Wildlife Action Plans and conserve the over 12,000 "Species of Greatest Conservation Need" (SGCN), many of which are not hunted or fished. The severe, systemic underfunding of non-game species conservation underscores the transformative potential of RAWA's proposed allocation. The bill emphasizes proactive conservation measures, including comprehensive habitat restoration, invasive species management, reintroduction of native species, disease control, and support for wildlife-associated recreation like wildlife viewing and photography. It is also projected to generate a significant number of direct jobs, estimated at 33,600 annually. As of March 2023, RAWA (S. 1149) had been reintroduced in the U.S. Senate with bipartisan co-sponsorship and was pending introduction in the House, following its exclusion from the December 2022 omnibus budget bill. The passage of RAWA would fundamentally shift the landscape of wildlife conservation funding, enabling the Wisconsin DNR to implement its State Wildlife Action Plan comprehensively and proactively. This would significantly reduce the DNR's reliance on traditional consumptive user fees for non-game species and provide a stable, dedicated funding source for biodiversity conservation.
  - **Exploring Broader User-Pay, User-Benefit Models** To further diversify funding, Wisconsin can explore broader applications of the "user-pay, user-benefit" principle beyond traditional hunting and fishing.
    - **Outdoor Recreation Equipment Taxes:** Building upon the successful model of federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment, a similar state-level tax could be applied to a wider range of outdoor recreation equipment. This would encompass gear for activities such as hiking, camping, kayaking, birdwatching, and rock climbing. Proposed federal legislation, like the Sporting Goods Excise Tax Modernization Act, already seeks to close loopholes on imported equipment to ensure proper collection of existing excise taxes, demonstrating a pathway for expanding this concept to a broader range of outdoor goods.
    - **General Sales Tax Allocations:** Several states have successfully implemented models where a dedicated percentage of state sales tax revenue is directly allocated to fish and wildlife agencies, providing a stable and substantial funding source. For example, Missouri's 1/8 of 1% sales tax contributes over 60% of its wildlife agency's total budget, and Minnesota voters approved a 3/8 of 1% sales tax increase for conservation. This mechanism broadens the funding base beyond direct users to the general public, linking conservation funding to the overall economic activity.
    - **Expanded Registration Fees for Non-Hunting Outdoor Activities:** Wisconsin currently collects registration fees for motorized boats and ATVs, which contribute

to specific Conservation Fund accounts. This model could be expanded to include other non-motorized outdoor recreational activities or equipment, such as non-motorized watercraft (kayaks, canoes, paddleboards), or even specific trail permits for high-use hiking or biking areas. This would ensure that a broader spectrum of outdoor enthusiasts contributes to the maintenance of the resources they utilize.

These models offer significant potential for the DNR to secure substantial, stable, and diversified funding by engaging the vast and growing non-consumptive outdoor recreation community. By linking funding to broader sales taxes on outdoor equipment or general sales tax allocations, the DNR can tap into the economic activity generated by all who benefit from or participate in outdoor recreation. This shifts the financial burden from a narrow user group to a broader beneficiary base, fostering a more equitable and sustainable funding ecosystem.

- **Creative Mechanisms: Leveraging Fines, Restitution, and Citizen Science Initiatives**  
Beyond broad-based user fees and taxes, several creative mechanisms can augment DNR funding.

- **Increased Fines for Wildlife Violations and Restitution for Resource Damage:** While Wisconsin already collects penalties for fish and game law violations, increasing the severity of fines for poaching and other wildlife crimes, and ensuring robust restitution payments for resource damage, could provide additional revenue. This also serves as a stronger deterrent against illegal activities.
- **Sales of Forfeited Equipment:** Equipment seized during wildlife law enforcement actions (e.g., illegal hunting gear, vehicles) could be sold, with the proceeds directed to the Conservation Fund.
- **Expanded "Adopt a Fish or Wildlife Area" Program:** Wisconsin currently has a program that allows individuals and organizations to provide financial donations and volunteer for activities like property posting, habitat improvements, and litter removal. This program could be significantly expanded through increased public awareness campaigns and partnerships with environmental groups, encouraging more direct financial contributions and volunteer hours.
- **Citizen Science Initiatives:** While not a direct funding mechanism, robust citizen science programs (e.g., wolf monitoring) can significantly reduce operational costs for data collection and monitoring. Furthermore, by actively engaging the public in conservation efforts, these programs can foster a deeper sense of ownership and appreciation, potentially leading to increased voluntary donations and advocacy for conservation funding.

These creative mechanisms, while individually smaller in scale than broad-based taxes, collectively contribute to a diversified funding portfolio and strengthen the connection between public behavior (both positive and negative) and conservation outcomes. They demonstrate a commitment to utilizing all available avenues for financial support, including those that reinforce conservation ethics and foster direct public participation.

**Table 2: Proposed Innovative Funding Mechanisms: Feasibility and Potential Impact**

Proposed Mechanism	Description/Funding Source	Status/Feasibility	Potential Annual Revenue (where estimated)
Dedicated Habitat Stamp	Mandatory or voluntary stamp for all outdoor recreation users (hikers, bikers, paddlers, etc.) to fund habitat projects.	Strong public support (majority "Yes" in many counties in 2025 Spring Hearing) ; requires legislative action.	\$5M+

Proposed Mechanism	Description/Funding Source	Status/Feasibility	Potential Annual Revenue (where estimated)
Sandhill Crane Stamp	Stamp sales/donations to compensate farmers for crane-caused crop damage (seed treatment).	69% voter support in 2025 Spring Hearing ; rejected by WCC ; requires legislative action.	Not specified
Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA)	Federal legislation redirecting existing energy development revenues to state/tribal wildlife agencies for non-game conservation.	Bipartisan federal bill (S. 1149) reintroduced in Senate, pending House introduction ; requires federal passage.	\$1.3B+ nationally
Outdoor Recreation Equipment Tax	State sales tax on a wider range of outdoor recreation gear (hiking, camping, paddling, etc.).	Proven model (federal excise taxes on hunting/fishing gear) ; requires state legislative action.	Significant (Not specified)
General Sales Tax Allocation	Dedicating a small percentage of statewide sales tax to Conservation Fund.	Proven model in other states (MO, AR, MN) ; requires state legislative action.	Significant (e.g., MO's 1/8 of 1% generates \$120M)
Expanded Non-Hunting Activity Registration Fees	New or increased registration fees for non-motorized watercraft (kayaks, canoes, paddleboards) or general outdoor recreation passes.	Existing model for motorized vehicles ; requires state legislative action.	Variable (Not specified)
Increased Fines/Restitution	Higher penalties for wildlife violations, ensuring full restitution for resource damage.	Already a revenue source ; requires legislative action.	Variable (Not specified)
Expanded "Adopt-a" Programs	Increased promotion and engagement for direct financial donations and volunteerism for specific sites/projects.	Existing program ; requires enhanced marketing/outreach.	Variable (Not specified)

### 5. Challenges and Opportunities in Funding Diversification

- Navigating Political and Legislative Hurdles for New Revenue Streams** The implementation of new taxes or fees, even those with broad public support, inherently necessitates statutory or legislative action, a process that is often "politically challenging and time intensive". This challenge is starkly illustrated by the Wisconsin Conservation Congress's rejection of the Sandhill Crane Stamp proposal, despite 69% voter support, which effectively halted its progression for formal policy consideration by the DNR. This outcome highlights a critical disconnect where advisory bodies, or legislative inaction, can impede the translation of clear public will into concrete funding mechanisms. Furthermore,

the ongoing political disputes surrounding wolf management in Wisconsin, including contentious debates over population goals and harvest regulations, exemplify how deeply entrenched political divisions can affect the DNR's operational stability and funding priorities. Such controversies can divert crucial attention and resources from broader, long-term funding diversification efforts. The interplay of public opinion, political will, and the legislative process is complex. The DNR and its conservation partners must develop sophisticated political and advocacy strategies to translate public support into legislative action. This includes educating policymakers, building bipartisan coalitions, and potentially exploring reforms to ensure that public input mechanisms like the WCC more accurately reflect and advance public priorities. Overcoming these political hurdles is as critical as identifying the funding sources themselves.

- **Ensuring Predictability and Sustainability of Funding** Current federal funding, while a significant source for state wildlife agencies, remains subject to the annual congressional appropriations process and shifting political priorities. This inherent unpredictability can lead to significant operational disruptions for state agencies, including job losses and the abandonment of long-term research projects, as evidenced by federal agency experiences. Similarly, voluntary contributions, by their very nature, are susceptible to economic downturns and changes in public sentiment, making them inherently less predictable for consistent, large-scale core operations. In contrast, models like dedicated percentages of state sales tax, successfully implemented in states such as Missouri, Arkansas, and Minnesota, are highlighted as providing "sustainable, long-term and often significant funding" due to their broad and relatively stable tax base. This contrast between the documented instability of federal appropriations and the inherent variability of voluntary donations versus the proven long-term nature of dedicated sales tax allocations clearly delineates the spectrum of funding predictability. To achieve true financial resilience and support long-term conservation goals, the DNR must prioritize funding mechanisms that are dedicated, less susceptible to annual political negotiation, and insulated from short-term economic fluctuations. This strongly favors mechanisms like dedicated sales tax allocations or statutorily mandated user fees that automatically flow to conservation efforts, providing a stable foundation for planning and implementation.
- **Engaging Diverse Stakeholders and Non-Consumptive Users** The traditional "user-pay, user-benefit" model for wildlife conservation, primarily funded by hunting and fishing licenses and related excise taxes, largely serves the interests of hunters and anglers. However, the demographic of outdoor enthusiasts is broadening significantly, with a growing number of individuals participating in non-consumptive activities such as hiking, birdwatching, paddling, and photography. Proposals like the \$5 annual habitat stamp directly address this demographic shift by explicitly aiming to engage non-consumptive users in contributing to habitat conservation. The DNR has already recognized the need to expand its outreach efforts to include groups traditionally less likely to hunt and fish, such as women and minority groups, as a strategy to stabilize revenues. The traditional funding model's reliance on a specific demographic creates a financial ceiling and a narrow political base. The explicit mention of engaging "women and minority groups" and the design of the habitat stamp for "non-consumptive users" signals an internal recognition within the DNR and WCC of a changing landscape of outdoor recreation. Future funding strategies must actively cultivate and integrate the diverse and growing population of non-consumptive outdoor users into the financial support structure. This requires not only creating new revenue mechanisms tailored to these groups but also dedicated outreach and education campaigns to demonstrate how their contributions directly benefit the outdoor experiences and natural heritage they value. This expansion of the "conservation constituency" also strengthens the political advocacy for wildlife funding.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations for a Resilient Financial Future**

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources faces significant financial challenges stemming from an over-reliance on a narrow base of consumptive user fees and the increasing unpredictability of federal funding. This situation is compounded by broadening conservation needs that extend beyond traditional game management to encompass a wider array of species and ecological processes. To ensure long-term financial sustainability and robust natural resource stewardship, a strategic shift towards a diversified funding portfolio is not merely advantageous but imperative.

Based on the analysis of existing alternative revenue streams and innovative proposals, the following recommendations are put forth to secure a more resilient financial future for the Wisconsin DNR:

- **Strategic Pursuit and Maximization of Federal Grants** The DNR should establish or strengthen a dedicated unit focused on federal grant acquisition, actively monitoring and applying for programs such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), Recreational Trails Program (RTP), and State Wildlife Grant (SWG) Program. This unit should also ensure the DNR maintains sufficient state-level matching funds to leverage these federal dollars effectively. Furthermore, aggressive and sustained advocacy for the passage and full funding of national legislation, particularly the Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA), is critical. This involves collaborating with national conservation organizations, congressional delegations, and other state agencies to highlight RAWA's transformative potential for non-game species conservation, habitat restoration, and job creation. This approach acknowledges the reality of federal funding while simultaneously working to influence it towards greater stability and scope, ensuring that Wisconsin is well-positioned to benefit from national conservation initiatives.
- **Advocating for State-Level Legislative Changes to Implement New Funding Mechanisms** Prioritize legislative efforts to implement a broad-based habitat stamp, capitalizing on the strong public support demonstrated in the Wisconsin Conservation Congress Spring Hearing results. This requires direct engagement with state legislators and public education campaigns to clarify the benefits and broad applicability of such a stamp to all outdoor enthusiasts. Concurrently, a comprehensive study and advocacy campaign should be initiated for allocating a dedicated percentage of state sales tax revenue to the Conservation Fund. This strategy draws lessons from successful models in other states like Missouri and Minnesota, emphasizing the stability and significant revenue potential of such a mechanism. Additionally, exploration of legislative changes to expand existing registration fees to a wider array of non-hunting outdoor recreational activities and equipment (e.g., non-motorized watercraft, specific trail permits) is recommended to ensure a more equitable contribution from all who benefit from Wisconsin's natural resources and outdoor infrastructure. This set of recommendations represents the most critical strategic shift for the DNR, moving towards greater financial independence and predictability.
- **Enhancing Non-Consumptive User Engagement and Contributions** Develop and execute targeted marketing and outreach campaigns to highlight the value of non-game wildlife and habitat conservation to the broader public, including hikers, birdwatchers, paddlers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. These campaigns should clearly articulate how their contributions directly support the natural resources they enjoy. Actively promote and expand existing voluntary contribution programs, such as the Endangered Resources license plates and the income tax check-off, ensuring their visibility and ease of participation. Exploring digital platforms and partnerships can further simplify and encourage donations. Furthermore, expanding and promoting the "Adopt a Fish or Wildlife Area" program can encourage increased volunteerism and direct financial contributions from individuals and organizations for specific property maintenance and habitat improvement projects. This strategy fosters a deeper connection between the public and

the DNR's mission, transforming passive users into active stakeholders, which provides both direct financial benefits and builds a stronger political constituency for conservation.

- **Fostering Public-Private Partnerships and Innovative Philanthropy** Proactively seek and cultivate partnerships with private conservation organizations, corporate entities committed to environmental social governance (ESG), and philanthropic foundations. This could involve co-funding specific conservation projects, establishing matching grant programs, or securing multi-year commitments for strategic initiatives. Enhance promotional efforts for conservation easements and direct land gifts, clearly communicating the potential federal and state tax advantages for donors. Developing streamlined processes to facilitate these complex transactions and ensuring alignment with DNR's long-term land management goals is crucial. Lastly, investigating the feasibility of implementing "Payment for Ecosystem Services" (PES) models in Wisconsin should be explored. This involves identifying beneficiaries of healthy ecosystems (e.g., municipalities benefiting from clean water, industries seeking carbon sequestration) and developing mechanisms for them to financially compensate the DNR for the maintenance of these services. This approach allows the DNR to access significant external capital and expertise, reducing reliance on public funds alone, and fostering shared responsibility for conservation among diverse sectors.

By strategically implementing these recommendations, the Wisconsin DNR can build a diversified and resilient financial foundation, ensuring the long-term health of its diverse ecosystems, protecting its unique wildlife, and sustaining the quality of life and economic benefits derived from its natural heritage for generations to come.

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