GROUNDSWELL CONSERVANCY

Conservation where you live
SPRING 2026

Groundswell Helps New Farmer Buy Land Affordably

Equitable Access Model Opens the Door to Planting Roots—and Fruit Trees—on Protected Land

Dr. Kathleen Rhoades

Adam D'Angelo

By: Yimmuaj Yang, Community Director

When I joined Groundswell nearly six years ago, I had a vision: Expand access to farmland beyond renting and create a path to ownership. That vision relies on conservation easements, which protect farmland and make it more affordable for the next generation.

This past winter, that vision became reality. **With support from partners and donors, we closed our first farmland ownership project—protecting 21 acres at Elizabeth Rock Farms in the Town of Verona and making it affordable for a new farmer.**

The project began in 2020, when landowner E Makar reached out to me about transitioning their family farm to someone who would care for the land and continue its legacy.

In 2022, we partnered with Alison Volk at American Farmland Trust (AFT), who had used the Buy–Protect–Sell model in Minnesota. The model allows land to be purchased, protected with a conservation agreement, and then sold to a farmer at a more affordable price. **This approach helps address a critical threat to farmland: rising land values and the risk of productive farms being lost to development.**

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Groundswell recently helped Adam D'Angelo (pictured in inset photo) buy the 21-acre Elizabeth Rock Farms (pictured above, alongside neighboring farms) in the Town of Verona.

Land Protection Team to Grow

New Role Will Boost Local Conservation, Partnerships

Farmland in the Black Earth Creek valley

Amy Mertz, Director of Major & Planned Gifts

Groundswell Conservancy has reached an important milestone in our work to protect land across Dane County and south-central Wisconsin. Over the past year, we led a campaign to grow our capacity in response to rising development pressure and a strong demand for conservation.

A $40,000 grant from Madison Community Foundation (MCF), generous gifts from private donors, and support from our Strategic Budgetary Fund helped us reach our $250,000 goal. This funding will support a new Land Protection Manager position for the next three years.

This investment will help keep our landscapes healthy and supportive of our communities for years to come. It will enable us to protect farmland and care for water, and make it easier for people to get outside and enjoy nature.

The new role will help us act more quickly to protect land, take on more projects, and strengthen partnerships across the region. These include Dane County Land and Water Resources; towns, such as Dunn and Dunkirk; the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources; and federal partners.

"Groundswell does such important work to preserve green places and farmland," said Angela Davis, MCF's Director of Grantmaking. "Madison Community Foundation is happy to support this effort to expand land conservation in Dane County. Groundswell's ability to work with partners across jurisdictions helps ensure public access to natural areas for everyone."

Since Groundswell's founding in 1983, we've protected nearly 15,000 acres of farmland, natural areas, and water resources. In the past decade, we've completed 62 projects. Adding staff will help us build on this progress while advancing priorities like climate resilience, equitable access to farmland, farmland protection, and public trail connections.

We're in the process of hiring for the Land Protection Manager role. We expect the new team member to start this summer.

We're deeply grateful to the following for supporting the new position: Anonymous (2), Joan Braune & Tod Highsmith, Dave Drapac, Bob & Gail Green, Cate & John Harrington, Susan Hunt & Karl Gutknecht, Dr. Patrick & Linda McKenna, Oberweiler Foundation, Jo & Herman Tucker, and Pat Wende. ■

Pictured left to right: Yimmuaj Yang, Alison Volk, Adam D'Angelo, Ella Jordahl, and Peter McKeever celebrate after the Elizabeth Rock Farms closing.

Groundswell Helps New Farmer Buy Land Affordably

(Continued from page 1)

Adam D'Angelo discovered his love of farming on his family's Christmas tree farm in New Jersey. He always wanted to farm but couldn't afford land in Wisconsin.

"It was so hard to buy farmland because it's so expensive," Adam said. "I reached out to many people and organizations for help." He eventually connected with Bonnie Warndahl from Renewing the Countryside's Farmland Access Navigator Team, applied for Elizabeth Rock Farms, and was selected.

This spring, Adam's excited to get planting. He plans to grow pawpaw, persimmon, tart cherry, heartnut, and chestnut trees; vines of hardy kiwis; and honeyberry and serviceberry bushes. If everything goes according to plan, there'll be a herd of sheep grazing the pasture among the orchards someday.

This project depended on strong partnerships. We're grateful to Alison and AFT for their key role, and the funders who supported this work: Schlecht Family Foundation, Nimick Forbesway Foundation, Racine Dominican Mission, and Forward Community Investments.

We're also grateful to partners who helped identify the farm's new owner and provided financing: Renewing the Countryside, Compeer Financial, and the Universities of Wisconsin Food Finance Institute.

The Dane County Land and Water Resources Department helped close the gap between the purchase price and the farm's protected value. "Dane County is proud to support the protection of this farmland and to work with American Farmland Trust and Groundswell Conservancy on this project," County Executive Melissa Agard said. "This effort supports retiring farmers, creates opportunities for the next generation, and ensures the land stays in agriculture."

Together, this project passed on a family legacy, created an affordable path to farmland ownership, and protected 21 acres for agriculture's future—demonstrating how conservation can help the next generation of farmers, and keep farmland working for people and nature. **If you have an interest in supporting our farmland ownership program, contact me at yimmuaj@groundswellconservancy.org or 608-258-9797.** ■

PROTECTED FOREVER

Groundswell's 2026–2030 Strategic Plan: Meeting Today's Challenges With Urgency

Vicki France

In 2024, Groundswell began a strategic planning process, and many of you helped shape it. We're grateful to all who participated. Our board approved the new plan in November 2025, positioning us to tackle urgent challenges: Land is becoming increasingly expensive, farmland is disappearing, and climate change and inequitable access strain people's connections to nature.

Groundswell has built deep expertise in land protection, stewardship, and conservation easements. Our new plan focuses that experience on four program areas with concrete, measurable goals:

Land Protection
- Expand priority landscapes (Black Earth Creek, Patrick Marsh, Westport Prairie) by 10% to enhance habitat connectivity and ecological impact
- Ensure 20% of projects expand public and equitable access, and serve the whole community
- Launch Buy-Protect-Sell+ Program, providing 2–5 emerging farmers with secure, affordable land access

Land Stewardship
- Transition 50% of remaining farmland at Westport Prairie to prairie by 2030, engaging the community along the way
- Enhance volunteer stewardship, expanding opportunities and participation
- Demonstrate sustainable soil health strategies at Westport Farm to aid in adoption by other growers

Community Awareness & Engagement
- Invite a more diverse audience to participate in events and volunteer programs
- Bolster support for key funding programs like the Dane County Conservation Fund through timely communications to supporters and decision-makers
- Showcase the full scope of our work, from land protection to equitable access

Long-Term Health
- Create and roll out a five-year strategic fundraising plan to address increased conservation opportunities
- Strengthen our financial foundation, including Easement Enforcement and Legal Defense funds
- Diversify staff, board, volunteers, and donor base to reflect the communities we serve

We look forward to working with you to bring this plan to life—protecting critical lands, strengthening stewardship, and expanding access for all. View or download an abbreviated version of the plan at groundswellconservancy.org/strategicplan2026-2030. ■

Above: Hauge Historic District Park, noted for its spectacular sunsets and quiet, scenic hiking trails, is protected with a conservation easement.

Remembering William 'Bill' George Lunney

September 24, 1941–February 28, 2026

Heidi Habeger, Executive Director

Judie Pfeifer and Bill Lunney

Where do I begin? For more than 50 years, Bill Lunney held leadership roles in land conservation across Wisconsin, and we all benefit from his extraordinary dedication.

In April 1970, Bill spoke at the first Earth Day celebration at UW-Madison. His early efforts to change land use policies helped preserve wetlands including Dunn's Marsh, the South Beltline Wetlands, and what would become the Lewis Nine Springs E-Way. Bill's hard work can be seen across Dane County in places like the E-Way, Cherokee Marsh, CamRock County Park, Donald County Park, Patrick Marsh, and the Lussier Family Heritage Center—as well as many connecting trails that link these cherished landscapes.

At the state level, Bill was part of efforts to preserve thousands of acres in the Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area, Baraboo Hills, the Door Peninsula, Northern Wisconsin Forests, and the State Trails system.

Bill was one of the key figures in Groundswell Conservancy's inaugural conservation success—Wally Bauman Woods—and the formation of our organization in 1983, then known as Dane County Natural Heritage Foundation. As Bill O'Connor put it, "As a County Board member in 1983, Bill Lunney was an indispensable ally for the newborn land trust." Bill went on to serve as our second board president from 1988 to 1993. Under his leadership, Groundswell was the first nonprofit to receive a Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program grant.

He chaired the Dane County Parks Commission for more than 30 years and served as Board Chair of The Nature Conservancy of Wisconsin and the Friends of Wisconsin State Parks. "He was generous in sharing both his knowledge and his connections—invaluable to a newly founded board," said former Groundswell board member and charter member Jean Meanwell.

But beyond his many accomplishments, Bill was a trusted advisor, a generous mentor, and a dear friend. He is deeply missed. I'll always be grateful for the time Jim Welsh and I spent with him and his wife, Judie Pfeifer, each year—conversations filled with wisdom, perspective, and his steady encouragement. He had a remarkable ability to connect past and present, reminding us where we came from while helping us see where we needed to go.

Bill was inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame on April 21. Watch for a recording of the ceremony at wchf.org/2026-induction-events/.

To read the full article, visit groundswellconservancy.org/Lunney. ■

Ben Lam

Plan Today to Protect Tomorrow's Landscapes

Take the next step in protecting the lands you love: Join Groundswell's Legacy Circle by including a gift in your will or estate plans. This meaningful commitment costs nothing today, yet it helps ensure local land and water are protected for generations to come. Visit groundswellconservancy.org/legacy or contact Amy Mertz, Director of Major & Planned Gifts, at amy@groundswellconservancy.org for details.

State Conservation Funding Remains Under Threat

Ben Jones

Groundswell permanently protected 84 acres of wetlands along Six Mile Creek in Waunakee in 2019. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program partially funded this land purchase.

Program to Expire June 30 Unless Legislature Acts

Tony Abate, Senior Director of Conservation

Wisconsin's long-running Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program faces an uncertain future, with funding set to expire on June 30 after the State Senate did not act on reauthorization this spring. While this puts the 40-year-old program at risk, conservation leaders remain optimistic and determined to keep it alive.

Since 1989, Knowles-Nelson has supported parks, trails, and wildlife areas in every corner of the state—places that millions of residents rely on for outdoor recreation and quality of life. Strong public support continues, with polling showing that 93% of Wisconsinites want to see ongoing investment in land conservation.

Local organizations like Groundswell Conservancy are committed to finding a path forward, whether through a special legislative session or future budget action. In the meantime, public voices matter more than ever.

Take action today by contacting your legislators at knowlesnelson.org and help protect Wisconsin's outdoor legacy. You can also request a yard sign to show your support for the program by sending a message through the Team Knowles-Nelson contact page: knowlesnelson.org/contact-us/. ■

Westport Prairie Keeps Growing

Mario Quintana

Volunteers brave snowy weather to spread seeds at Westport Prairie.

Amanda Dambrink, Development Coordinator

On a snowy, windy day in January, volunteers fanned out across a stubbly cornfield at Westport Prairie to scatter seeds by the fistful. The cheerful crew covered a whopping 9 acres! Afterward, we enjoyed hot dogs and snacks around a bonfire.

Thank you to all who helped make this year's planting possible. We're grateful for your contributions of time, money, expertise, and materials. A special thanks goes to students from Waunakee High School who helped throughout the year, and to Southern Wisconsin Bird Alliance for donating seeds.

With your help, we'll plant even more seeds each year until all of Westport Prairie is blanketed with native tallgrass prairie. Imagine how happy the locals will be—from bobolinks and badgers to rusty patched bumble bees.

We hope you visit Westport Prairie this summer and in every season. There's always something new to see out in nature! ■

Karin Swanson/Clean Lakes Alliance

Renew the Blue Council members and the Clean Lakes Alliance Community Board gathered for the council's first meeting on February 4.

Groundswell Joins Renew the Blue Council to Improve Water Quality

Tony Abate, Senior Director of Conservation

Groundswell is excited to join the Renew the Blue Council, an effort led by the Clean Lakes Alliance. This important work will advance our shared vision of a healthy Yahara Watershed.

Groundswell leaders Heidi Habeger and Tony Abate were named delegates to the council, which includes 45 nonprofit and government entities. Together, we're focused on implementing 12 high-leverage actions to improve water quality.

For Groundswell, this partnership is a perfect fit for our mission. We believe that protecting land is the best way to protect water. The Yahara Watershed covers 27 different towns and two counties. Because water flows across property lines and city borders, we must work together to see real results. We're excited to share our expertise in land conservation to help restore the lakes and streams that make our region special. ■

Lend a Hand on the Land

Groundswell hosts two outdoor volunteering days each month: the second Saturday from 9–11:30 a.m. at Westport Prairie; and the third Friday from 9–11:30 a.m. at Patrick Marsh. We provide tools and equipment; just bring work gloves. Be sure to sign up for our outdoor volunteer email list; that's how you'll RSVP for each event. Visit groundswellconservancy.org/get-involved to sign up for emails and for more details.

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Mission

We protect special places, forever. We want everyone to live in a world filled with green places where communities thrive. We believe that land is essential for all people's physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness. If we don't protect undeveloped land now, it may be lost forever.

GROUNDSWELL
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Conservation where you live

Newsletter designed by Jeff Weyer

Groundswell Conservancy strives to use equitable language in our written communications. If you have feedback on how we can improve, please email amy@groundswellconservancy.org.

Special Places to Explore Together

We invite you to join us out on the land this summer! Don't miss this chance to visit some of the places you've helped protect. These events are free and open to the public. Reserve your spot today at groundswellconservancy.org/events or call us at 608-258-9797.

Roberta Herschleb

Foraging with Chris Gavin

Saturday May 30, 2026
10 a.m.–12 p.m.

Explore the Black Earth Creek valley in search of edible plants and mushrooms with Master Naturalist and outdoor skills instructor Chris Gavin! Learn to forage safely and sustainably in Cross Plains' Hickory Hill Conservancy—53 acres protected by Groundswell.

Dane County Parks

Wetland Restoration Tour

Tuesday June 16, 2026
4–6 p.m.

Explore Walking Iron County Park just northwest of Mazomanie! Learn about the recent wetland restoration work (including 870 acres protected by Groundswell) completed by Dane County Parks, in partnership with Ducks Unlimited and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Ben Lam

Town of Dunn Food Cart Night

Wednesday, August 5, 2026
5:30–7:30 p.m.

Eat, gather, and explore at Town of Dunn Food Cart Night! Enjoy an evening of delicious local food while strolling scenic prairie trails. Our hosts will be Carole and Don Schmidt, in partnership with Custom Metals. Together, we permanently protected their property with a conservation easement.

Thank you to our sponsors

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