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Baraboo Hills awarded \$1 million

By Jennifer McBride

Another \$1 million in federal funding will be used to help protect the Baraboo Hills.

Representative Tammy Baldwin announced Thursday that Congress approved \$1 million in federal funding for the Baraboo Hills Conservation Project as part of the fiscal year 2003 budget. The funds, provided through the Forest Legacy Program, will be used to purchase land rights in the Baraboo Hills.

Jim Welsh, director of field conservation with the Nature Conservancy, said \$1 million will buy conservation easements of about 950 acres. The Nature Conservancy, a Baraboo organization, was one of the groups responsible for lobbying for the money.

The Department of Natural Resources will oversee the program, which allows property owners to retain their rights of ownership but does not allow for any building on the land, said Jim Welsh, director of field conservation with the Nature Conservancy. Owners can continue to use their properties for hunting and recreation.

"A portion of the community is concerned with private property rights," he said. "This is a volunteer program for landowners who want to work to keep their forest land forested."

The funding for this project will be used to purchase conservation easements in areas containing rare oak savannas. The properties will be linked with other protected properties that are experiencing development pressure.

"I'm delighted that these funds will allow us to protect the rare and impressive Baraboo Hills," Baldwin said. "This money is vital to ensure the protection of this important part of Wisconsin's natural heritage."

Welsh said the hills provide important forest land for a couple of reasons.

"This is the biggest block of oak and maple forest in the upper Midwest and it's incredibly good habitat for rare plants and animals," he said, adding it is also a good

area for hunting.

The Baraboo Hills have been designated as a National Natural Landmark.

"Scattered residential development is the biggest threat to areas such as the Baraboo Hills," Baldwin said. "The Madison metropolitan area is the fastest growing area in Wisconsin. Thus, we needed to act fast to secure funds to protect this area from future suburban sprawl."

The Baraboo Hills ecosystem is one of rare diversity and beauty, she added.

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