

# EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS OF PUBLIC LANDS BUT DIDN'T KNOW WHO TO ASK

## **Who is the Board of Commissioners of Public Lands and why are they important?**

The Board of Commissioners of Public Lands (BCPL) is comprised of the Secretary of State, the State Treasurer, and the Attorney General. Our founding fathers created the board in the 1848 Wisconsin Constitution for the important job of safeguarding one of Wisconsin's most valuable assets (the federal land grants and resulting land sale proceeds). At the time of statehood, the federal government granted Wisconsin 1.5 million acres of land in trust to support public schools and libraries. By the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, over 99% of these School Trust Lands were sold with the proceeds deposited into the Common School Fund.

## **What remains of these public lands and what are they used for?**

The public lands currently managed by BCPL number less than 78,000 acres and are located primarily in Northeastern Wisconsin. While some of these are Common School Trust Lands, most of the remaining BCPL managed lands came via the Swamp Land Act of 1850. Today, the remaining School Trust Lands are managed for sustainable timber management wherever possible. The revenue from timber harvests is deposited in the corresponding School Trust Fund. All of the School Trust Lands are open to the public for hunting, fishing, trapping and outdoor recreation. While the School Trust Lands managed by BCPL are important, they are just a small fraction of the total "public lands" in the State of Wisconsin.

## **How are the School Trust Funds managed?**

The Common School Fund and three smaller School Trust Funds are managed by BCPL to support public education in Wisconsin. The BCPL invests the principal of these trust funds in:

- ❖ Direct loans to municipalities and school districts to fund public purpose projects via the BCPL State Trust Fund Loan Program
- ❖ Bonds issued by the State of Wisconsin
- ❖ Bonds issued by Wisconsin municipalities and school districts
- ❖ Federal Farm Credit Bonds
- ❖ Other authorized investments as prescribed by Wis. Stats. § 24.61

## **How does the Common School Fund support public education?**

The net annual earnings of the Common School Fund are distributed to each Wisconsin K-12 public school district to purchase library materials. In 2025, BCPL distributed \$70 million in Common School Fund earnings, which are the sole source of state funding for public school libraries. For many school districts, this is the only money available to them for library books, newspapers and periodicals, web-based resources and computer hardware and software. This funding helps reduce local property taxes because the school district does not look to local taxpayers to fund these purchases.

## **What if I still have questions and want to learn more about the Board of Commissioners of Public Lands?**

Visit our website at [www.bcpl.wisconsin.gov](http://www.bcpl.wisconsin.gov)



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