



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

# Profiles

## IN

## CONSERVATION



### **From development to conservation: helping others keep and care for their land**

**Hard work, deeply held values, and a personal vision can sometimes determine a person's life course better than an expensive college education.**

*By Glenn Rosenholm*

Take Joe Hovel of Vilas County, WI. He started out decades ago with little more than a high school education, gradually built a successful but unique construction business, and eventually became a prominent landowner and conservationist.

"I was very unhappy being confined to classrooms as a young adult," he said. "I told my guidance counselor I wanted to get into the building trade, but my counselor disagreed. My father was the attorney in town. I had nine brothers and sisters, and they're college educated. This counselor couldn't accept the fact I wanted to build."



"Sometimes I've been slightly embarrassed by my lack of college education, but it's really about what you're passionate about," he added. "I went into building anyway, finding a niche market, and I've been self-employed my whole career since 1970."

Some years after he left high school, that same counselor saw a home that

*Top: Joe (left) and others build a log cabin for the Popoviches in Michigan. (Photo by Margo Popovich)*

*Bottom: Joe Hovel stands next to the largest red oak trunk in a clump of four. At 16 inches above the burl, the tree measures 28 inches in diameter. (Photo by Rachel Hovel)*



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Hovel had built, and he remarked about how beautiful and unique the cabin was.

“He was the same guy who tried to steer me away from building,” Hovel said. “I’ve done rather well.”

### **A landowner himself**

Today, partly as a result of his earlier business success, Hovel owns or manages in excess of 2,800 acres of well-managed forest land in Wisconsin and Michigan.

His home property in far northern Wisconsin in Vilas County encompasses mixed habitat of red pine, white pine, red oak, some red and sugar maple, birch, aspen, and spruce. He lives on the land with Mary, his wife of 47 years, and his son.

“Our three kids share in some degree in the ownership of our property,” he said. “The older sisters are in New Mexico and in Washington.”

They started acquiring the current home property, about 396 acres including a lake, in the early 1980s. Most of it they acquired within the first 5 years, and they added acreage later on. The property includes most of the shoreline of Nudist Lake. The name refers to the transparency of the water, he said.

“It’s a beautiful lake, deep and clear,” he said. “It’s almost 60 feet deep and only 30 acres in size.”

Their homeland is all connected and it’s all in one section. “The northeast and southwest quarters border Wisconsin State land and county land,” Hovel added.

“We are responsible for the protection of Nudist Lake, as well as the protection of the Wisconsin River, the Pilgrim River (in



*This large white pine was salvaged after a storm on Stormy Hill. The 8-foot log contained 270 Scribner board feet of wood. (Photo by Rachel Hovel)*

Michigan), and several more special riparian features on our properties. Our home property has very interesting topography. The lake is at about 1,650 feet of elevation. There’s a radar tower at 1,840 feet high that is at Stormy Hill just south of our property line.”

Almost all of their land, excluding the bodies of water, is forested.

“With the diversity of our three larger parcels we pretty much have every species of tree that grows in the upper Midwest,” he added. “We also have jack pine and some very unique wetlands with old white cedar, and hemlock, and large areas of sugar maple.”

They have other land holdings as well. About 15 miles from where they reside, they own a 1,042-acre property, referred to today as the [Upper Wisconsin River Legacy Forest](#). It’s in a Forest Legacy conservation easement.

“Another property we own that will soon be a [Legacy](#) forest will be called the Pilgrim Community Forest, and it’s about 1,100 acres,” he added. The land is in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. About 85 percent of his land is open to the public for nonmotorized uses, he said.

“I feel that public values are an important component of land conservation, and especially necessary when public funds are used.”



*Joe says they call the Nudist Lake-Stormy Hill property the “Porcupine Tree Farm” for a reason. (Photo by Rachel Hovel)*



*Pink lady slipper orchids grow in a cedar swamp on the Upper Wisconsin River Legacy Forest. (Photo by Rod Sharka)*

*Left: The Nudist Lake-Stormy Hill property protects nearly all of the shoreline around the clear, deep seepage lake. (Photo by Rachel Hovel)*





"I'm a tremendous fan of the Forest Legacy Program. I think it should be expanded so that it includes another tier of forest landowners. To do that is going to require a stronger political will and a deeper appreciation by the citizenry of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and—in Wisconsin—our Knowles-Nelson Stewardship fund."

Hovel serves as a member of the Wisconsin Forest Stewardship Committee.



He said his family also has several other smaller forest land investments, including 140 acres in three different tracts in central Wisconsin. They also own another special sugar maple, basswood, mixed hardwood forest in northern Vilas County, about 7 miles northwest of where they live.

Hovel added, "There are four other partners of a 120-acre parcel in the southern Upper Peninsula of Michigan; that project has frontage on Hilltop Lake and Trails End Lake and is immediately east of the Sylvania Wilderness area."

"We have sold some land," he said, "very selectively, only for conservation and to advance conservation goals. For example, a 1,103-acre sale to the State of Wisconsin in 2009 enabled the purchase of the Pilgrim River property."

Selling a part of the Pilgrim River property for a U.S. Forest Service "[Community Forest](#)" then made it possible to pursue what was to become the "Upper Wisconsin River Legacy Forest."

### Managing for outcomes

Hovel said, "I manage the land, and promote land conservation, for multiple benefits that I always envisioned to be important to land ownership." The benefits include these:

- Economic (growing timber, tourism);
- Social (recreation, hunting, fishing, etc., in a scenic area);
- Environmental (clean water, clean air, habitat for flora and fauna);
- And intrinsic (esthetics, inspiring beauty).

*Clockwise from top left: View of a cedar swamp on the Upper Wisconsin River Legacy Forest. (Photo by Rod Sharka)*

*After logging, Joe plants the landing areas in the Upper Wisconsin River Legacy Forest with 4-year-old jack pine transplants and site preps adjoining areas for the next spring planting. (Photo by Casey Clark)*

*Joe measures the diameter of a tree. The decision can be difficult—cut this tree now or wait until the next thinning. This veneer quality red oak is 25 inches in diameter at breast height (4.5 feet above the ground) in a predominantly sugar maple-basswood forest. (Photo by Rachel Hovel)*





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"For our properties, we carefully follow our management prescriptions. There are some deviations from that in places when conditions change, including drought and extensive deer browsing. There are all sorts of different stressors. We harvest as prescribed when it's deemed important," he added.

They also do a good amount of timber stand improvement work, he said.

"Next spring I have a significant planting project of 60 acres of pine. We work with NRCS [Natural Resources Conservation Service] and the [Conservation Stewardship Program](#), as well as Forest Legacy."

Taking part in conservation programs can sometimes be the difference between someone being able to afford a property, or their having to sell it, he said.

*Below: Joe gives a presentation stressing the importance of preventing fragmentation at a Partners in Forestry workshop. He often uses housing density charts to vividly demonstrate the trend. (Photo by Rachel Hovel)*

*Right: A Partners in Forestry workshop in the Upper Wisconsin River Legacy Forest in June 2015. (Photo by Rod Sharka)*



He tallied some of the programs they take part in, the main ones being...

- the Managed Forest Law and adjoining certification programs,
- the Commercial Forest Reserve in the State of Michigan,
- the Forest Stewardship Council certification program that's in place on the Pilgrim River property, and
- with NRCS, the Conservation Stewardship Program and EQIP program [Environmental Quality Incentives Program], and a partner program called RCPP, for Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The Managed Forest Law program in Wisconsin gives dual certification.

"Any financial help can be a huge incentive to accomplish forest management goals. With help, you can do a much better job than you could otherwise."

"What's more important, these incentives can make the difference between a landowner practicing good management or practicing excellent management. Sometimes that little financial help can make a world of difference in accomplishing the very best management," he added.

When asked about his feelings about improving his land, Hovel replied, "I think it can be spiritually gratifying. The intrinsic values are more important than any price. There is something that is truly therapeutic about seeing a 36-inch-diameter white pine towering over other trees in the woods."

"I'm elated and humbled with some of the things we've accomplished, but there's always something else to be concerned about," he said.

"We've got continual aggravations as well. We often have high deer numbers to deal with. The Natural Resource Board, in my opinion, has not recognized the severity of damage that deer have done to the land."

Today, Hovel spends much of his time with the co-op landowner group, helping other landowners practice good forest management to achieve positive outcomes on their land.





*One of the six cabins at the Big Bear Hideaway in Boulder Junction, WI. It is constructed of local material, except for the red cedar shake roofing from the Pacific Northwest. (Photo by Rachel Hovel)*

"I try to help other landowners appreciate these benefits for their own sake. They're all intertwined."

"The best management benefits the common good. We host a lot of these events. My job is to find other people to present and attend our workshops and to educate people. I've always looked at Partners in Forestry as a network of people learning from each other," he said.

He said he is extremely pleased with their board, adding, "The conservation expertise we have is incredible." The group includes a silviculturist, a conservation real estate professional, a biologist, a secretary who handles all newsletter layout, and a great "Web guy," with very passionate common-sense-minded landowners.

Hovel was one of the founding steering committee members in Partners in Forestry around the beginning of 2000. They achieved co-op status in 2002. In all, the co-op members own over 16,000 acres of primarily forested land, he said, adding, "I'm the only founding member who is still active on the board."

"Unlike other landowner groups, this co-op is willing to tackle some issues that most landowner groups won't," he said. "For instance, through the efforts of Partners in Forestry, Governor Doyle enacted the local lumber use law in 2008. No other group was willing to express their support. Individuals did, but not groups."

"[For] the second example, Partners in Forestry fought all the way to Federal appeals court in its opposition to what they felt was a bad land exchange for the Ottawa National Forest. We lost, but we stood up for what we still feel was right, and have no regrets."

Over the years, their group has worked on several major land deals that have served to conserve large tracts of pristine forest land. The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program and Forest Service Forest Legacy Program were essential to conserving these lands, he added.

"These programs are a huge benefit to communities."

## Challenges ahead

The aging landowner demographics of their co-op is a growing concern.

"About 100 to 150 members are in our co-op," he said. "Our membership is old and getting older. Getting their heirs involved is getting increasingly difficult. It's a sad fact, and there are plenty of challenges."

The news is not all bad, though. Some of these older members have sold their land for conservation or have done forest conservation easements. "We have also brought many landowners to practice good management."

Likewise, some of Hovel's own lands are in a family limited liability company, or LLC, to facilitate transfer of the land to their kids. He said the LLC idea was an estate planning tool he learned from a Forest Service publication, "[Estate planning for forest landowners: what will become of your timberland?](#)", which they have used at workshops.

"We have much appreciated our partnership with the Forest Service in providing us very valuable publications."

He said he can sum up his current life focus in two words: *conservation activism*.

"Protecting these lands for future generations is essential," he said. "Working forest land, like crop land, is essential to future generations. It's part of my moral code."

In their immediate area, forest fragmentation and parcelization are the biggest threats, he said. In some other areas, the challenges may vary.

"Climate change is also a challenge and leaves us uncertain about the future," Hovel added. Changing habitat types, increasing deer numbers, periods of drought, and severe weather are related concerns. Evidence shows that larger tracts of land withstand these stresses better.

"The less of a financial burden your land is, and the more that it is considered an asset, the less likely that a landowner would consider selling it. The economics play big into this. A program we did in 2014 was titled 'The economics of land conservation.' It was termed a leadership



topic. We talked about the benefits of letting trees grow to full potential. We had an accountant talk about the tax benefits of conserving land. One of our presenters negotiated some of the largest conservation projects in the State of Wisconsin. We keep a lot of good information on our Web site from this event.”

When asked if he would recommend owning land to others, he said, “Absolutely, although not every individual is suited to be a landowner. I’m a tireless advocate for public land, because everyone should have a stake in the land. I’m also passionate about property rights. But not all landowners deserve the privilege to be landowners. Some people abuse the land.”

Reflecting on his business roots, Hovel said, “I still build now at a very reduced pace. My son is taking some of it on. I’m still mildly active at what I’ve done for years. Land conservation activities have become my primary focus.”

“In the 1970s I was determined to wisely use local resources. We sometimes hired people to peel bark on our logs for log homes. We would leave a couple square inches of paint on the log to show that the log was sustainably harvested.”

“Green building—those kinds of terms weren’t invented yet,” he added.

“In the 1990s I built a resort complex in a small tourism-centered town. I had asked, ‘Who will be the last guy to build the last house on the last lake?’ and wanted to do something other than contribute to that trend ... I didn’t take on any other projects until I built this resort complex. Proudly and sustainably built, it’s a mini log village of its own, accenting this town in the heart of the Wisconsin Northern Highland State Forest. It is our retirement fund. It’s a beautiful testimony to sustainable building and to using local materials.”

When not working, Hovel said he still enjoys roaming his land and waterways.

“I love the outdoors. I love spending time in the woods. A hike, a bike ride, paddling, and at times a ride on the trails on my UTV help to connect me with the outdoors.”

“Management, which leads to conservation, helps to give my life meaning these days.”

Now he’s getting to enjoy the fruits of his labor.



Joe, his wife Mary, and Wisconsin Governor Doyle attended a dedication of the Northern Highlands purchase of the Hovel property, August 23, 2009. (Photo by Rod Sharka)



Joe roughly scales hardwood after a Highway B thinning project, on the Northern Highlands property. (Photo by Rod Sharka)