



## Conservation Stewardship in the Time of COVID-19

Conservation stewardship ensures that the conservation values of protected properties are preserved over time. For conservation easements, this requires careful annual monitoring, recordkeeping and fostering a mutually beneficial relationship with each landowner. For fee properties, a land trust needs to inspect each property at least annually to ensure conservation values are not damaged by malicious or negligent acts, that people are not endangered by safety hazards and that continuous encroachment or unauthorized uses do not cause the land trust to lose the property or parts of it altogether. Annual monitoring and property inspections are a prerequisite to maintain eligibility to participate in TerraFirma. For accredited land trusts, land trusts must monitor all conservation easements once per calendar year and document one inspection of each conservation property every calendar year. See Practices [11C2](#) and [12C2](#) of *Land Trust Standards and Practices* for more information.

But the world has suddenly and dramatically changed this spring of 2020. What considerations should stewardship staff evaluate in responding to the temporary need to avoid close contact with others and to adhere to the many state and local laws suspending all but essential activities?

For those of you with stay-at-home orders, you may be wondering when you will be able to monitor your easements and fee properties. The good news is that it is early in the year. To meet the accreditation requirements, as long as a visit is within a *calendar* year, the visits can be more than 12 months apart. A land trust that visited a property in April 2019 but then next in December 2020 would still meet the accreditation requirements. The Commission understands that now is the time to think about keeping your employees and volunteers safe. This approach also satisfies the TerraFirma requirements.

### Risk Management Tips

Here are some overarching risk management tips and guidance to help you evaluate appropriate stewardship actions in light of this rapidly evolving pandemic:

1. Cancel all public events.
2. In general, prohibit volunteers from participating in stewardship activities (unless they can conduct the work independently, alone and preferably remotely, such as monitoring wildlife cameras or reviewing remote-sensing data). This approach may not be feasible for all-volunteer land trusts.
3. Cancel contract stewardship work for all nonessential projects on preserves.
4. Avoid all in-person contact with landowners.
5. Maintain social distancing and avoid face-to-face contact with all people.
6. Provide the ability for all staff to work remotely from home. Many states are under "stay at home" orders.
7. Turn to technology for easement monitoring and property inspections. Consider accelerating any plans to implement remote-sensing protocols, such as through satellite imagery or droids.
8. Take steps to stay calm and turn to available resources for assistance.

### Should I Suspend All Stewardship Activities?

Some land trusts, after extensive consideration, have decided to suspend all external stewardship work immediately. The risk of a hospital visit for an injury in the field during the pandemic, especially in states

with hundreds of cases of the virus, is too great. Those land trusts also believe it is important to set a good example in their hard hit communities.

Some land trusts have encouraged staff and volunteers to "steward in place" by tackling invasives in their yards and participating in naturalist projects in their own spaces.

Every land trust needs to make their own determination based on their unique and individual circumstances, in consultation with their staff, board and legal counsel.

Land trust personnel are using their indoor time to update management plans, assess annual work plans, review insurance portfolios, update the risk management profile and grid, work out kinks with stewardship technology, catch up on some back-burner projects and trying to knock out as much paperwork as possible, such as management plan updates, policy updates and other desk-heavy required work.

### **What If We Decide to Proceed with Essential Work?**

Some land trusts are conducting some field work considered essential, especially for safety and public health issues on preserves and conservation easements with public access. Safe preserve and access management is a much larger topic.

Consult with your attorney on whether your state quarantine or stay-at-home order has a built-in exception or safety management standard applicable to your work or if you can petition for a specific exemption to manage public access points and other essential safety services.

If you decide to proceed with essential field visits, consider the following tips:

1. Require each person to travel in their own vehicle alone.
2. Maintain social distancing of at least six feet for all work.
3. Limit projects that require the use of tools.
4. Prohibit use of motorized equipment and chainsaws to avoid injury potentially requiring medical services.
5. Do not share field equipment or tools.
6. Only visit those properties that are safe for solitary monitoring.
7. Provide each person with disinfecting wipes and gloves.
8. Develop talking points for speaking remotely with landowners and others.
9. Establish a contingency plan for responding to sudden and/or severe enforcement actions. Develop specific criteria for what you consider urgent or essential, keeping land trust personnel and public safety in mind.

Additional extreme events, such as weather emergencies, may require further consideration and adaptation, such as for the removal of downed trees or flood rescues as spring flooding continues in some areas. Wildfire prone areas may require emergency fuel reduction, especially if a drought coincides with the pandemic response.

### **Should I Close My Preserves?**

In areas where the local, state and federal parks and open spaces are closed, some land trusts are following that lead and closing all (or many) preserves to public access and staff support. Other land trusts are keeping their preserves open to the public, consistent with governors' orders, especially where there are no facilities to maintain, such as bathrooms. If you decide to keep your properties open

to the public, consider replacing signage with up-to-date information on social distancing. If parking lots are full, encourage people to visit a different property and come back another day.

*Consult with your insurance carriers* before conducting any stewardship activities to ensure that you do not jeopardize your coverage and that you follow whatever requirements the carrier may have. The pandemic response is already costing carriers billions and lawsuits have started regarding coverage or lack thereof.

It may be necessary *to revisit requirements daily* to reevaluate and recalibrate as circumstances demand.

*Remember to document all decisions*, especially necessary deviations from standard procedures, so that you can demonstrate you were being responsible and responsive in light of the circumstances.

### **Resources**

- [Building Field Data Collection Tools for Monitoring](#), Land Trust Alliance webinar
- [Information on Novel Coronavirus](#), New York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
- [Joint Statement on Using Parks and Open Space While Maintaining Physical Distancing](#), National Recreation and Park Association
- [Keep Calm and Hike On](#), Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy (NY)
- [Tips for Social Distancing and the Outdoors](#), Conservation Northwest (WA)

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