



LAND CONSERVATION STRATEGY AND TOOLS

OVERVIEW

Big Waters Land Trust is a regional land conservancy committed to protecting land and water for the benefit of people and nature. Our work saves critical lands surrounding the key waterways and bays that feed the rich estuaries from the mouth of Tampa Bay, to Sarasota Bay, south to Charlotte Harbor and along the Gulf of Mexico. We are protecting the working lands and vital linkages from Duette Preserve in Manatee County to the Everglades. As the region’s population grows, citizens and community leaders are recognizing the importance of conserving land along these rivers and streams as critical to protecting the water and living resources of our rural land, coastal bays and Gulf of Mexico. We work with a variety of landowners who wish to protect their land for their family, the community and our quality of life.

Big Waters Land Trust conserves lands that benefit imperiled natural communities and species. Additionally, Big Waters conserves land that provides public access to unique land or land that is abundant in recreational resources. The organization recognizes the needs of citizens and visitors to experience the diverse lands that represent the array of special places in our service area. In order for us to foster an ethic of land stewardship, we will need to inform and engage citizens and decision makers throughout the region and build continued support for our land conservation endeavors.

PROJECT SELECTION: CONSERVATION VALUES

Big Waters conserves land and water for nature and people. We protect and preserve the environmental character and natural integrity of the unique ecosystems of southwestern Florida. We provide opportunities for people to experience nature directly.

As we protect lands in perpetuity, we must carefully evaluate each project to ascertain that it conforms to our selection criteria and can be managed appropriately. Big Waters has adopted specific criteria to evaluate and identify lands that have the highest importance for conservation or public access. Big Waters staff evaluates each opportunity in accordance with our conservation priorities and stewardship abilities. Projects presented to the Board for approval must meet Big Waters’ established priorities and conservation mission, be financially and ethically feasible, and provide a public benefit.

We use the following six conservation values to evaluate potential projects:

VALUES	PROJECT, ENHANCE AND RESTORE LANDS THAT:
Clean Water	Ensure clean drinking water
Imperiled Species	Support native wildlife species and biodiversity
Coastal Resiliency	Increase community resilience to natural disasters
Sustainable Agriculture	Practice sustainable agriculture
Access For All	Increase access to open spaces
Carbon Sequestration	Store carbon naturally

STEWARDSHIP OF OWNED LANDS AND CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

For both the lands we own and the conservation easements we hold, Big Waters recognizes the stewardship responsibilities upfront and ensures that the organization has sufficient resources (money, staff, and time) to fulfill its obligations. We recognize that we are taking on obligations that have perpetual responsibilities. For properties in which we choose to take on a management role, such as Bay Preserve in Osprey, Myakka Headwaters Preserve in Myakka City and Pine Island Preserve in Lee County, Big Waters will ensure that the activities and improvements made are suitable to protect the conservation values of the property, provide appropriate public access, and that we have the financial resources to maintain, and in many cases restore, the property and its improvements. As part of the project selection assessment, staff will assess the financial feasibility, stewardship obligations and funding opportunities within the community to support our work.

LAND PROTECTION TOOLS

Big Waters Land Trust secures land only from willing landowners. To accomplish its mission, Big Waters uses a variety of conservation tools customized to fit the specific opportunity and the needs of individual landowners and projects. These tools include:

1. **Full Fee Purchase:** Fee purchase is used when outright ownership is necessary or desired to protect the conservation values of the land. Fee ownership also offers the option of allowing public access to the site – a critical prong of Big Waters’ mission. This tool provides the highest degree of long-term protection for open space. It is also the most expensive and therefore will be used selectively.
2. **Conservation Easements:** A conservation easement is a legal agreement between Big Waters, or other qualified holder, and the landowner that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values. Each easement is negotiated specifically to meet the long term needs of the landowner, the mission of Big Waters, and protect the resources on the property. Such restrictions may prohibit future subdivision, limit the number, type and location of buildings, while allowing ranching, hunting, and recreational uses to continue. It allows the owners of the land to continue to own and manage it subject to the agreed upon restrictions. Big Waters is responsible for working with current and future owners to ensure that the terms of the conservation easement are enforced in perpetuity. These properties are not open to the public.
3. **Bargain Sale:** As population increases and land prices continue to rise in the region, acquisition has become more expensive. To reduce these costs, landowners may sell their land to Big Waters for less than fair market value and donate the remaining value to Big Waters. This strategy reduces the amount of money we must raise to pay for the property and also may provide tax advantages to the seller.
4. **Donation:** Community-minded landowners can donate undeveloped land for habitat protection or as community open space. In considering donations of land, the Big Waters considers benefit to the community, our selection criteria, and the long-term management opportunities and costs. This approach is one of the most cost-effective methods for conserving land. In addition, donation of land may offer tax benefits for the donor.
5. **Partnership Transactions:** Given the expense and complexity of many lands worthy of protection, partnerships and multiple conservation tools are usually required to conserve the land and ensure its appropriate stewardship. With its strong credibility and relationships with landowners and public agencies throughout the service area, Big Waters has successfully facilitated the protection of critical properties by

bringing together willing landowners, public agencies and a variety of funding to accomplish its land protection goals.

6. Conservation Buyers: Where appropriate, we will work with landowners of conserved land to find the next generation owner that will care for the land in accordance with the terms of a conservation easement.

7. Planning Partnerships: Big Waters Land Trust, its staff and volunteer leaders, will share our knowledge and expertise in local and regional planning efforts that incorporate land conservation and public parks and build the support for land protection and funding efforts.

8. Trade Lands: Big Waters Land Trust may also accept the donation of real estate that does not have significant conservation value with the intention of selling the property and using the proceeds to support our conservation mission. The acceptance of these “trade lands” will be based upon the marketability of the property and the temporary ownership costs.