

SENTINEL LANDSCAPES



PHOTO: SENIOR AIRMAN EMILY MOORE, U.S. AIR FORCE

PHOTO: SGT. AUSTAN R. OWEN, 5TH MOBILE PUBLIC AFFAIRS DETACHMENT



A new partnership targets the land around military bases.

BY JENNIFER SCHULTZ

At one time, most of our nation’s military installations were located in rural areas, far from the subdivisions and shopping malls of today. The rapid pace of development in recent years, however, is pushing communities closer to perimeter fences, challenging the military’s access to lands and airspace needed for training.

Encroachment—development that’s incompatible with military needs—can limit the use of training ranges, present obstacles to low-flying aircraft, cause light pollution that interferes with night training and degrade communication frequencies.

Meanwhile, working lands and wildlife habitat near bases are threatened, too. Lands used for farming, ranching and forestry are vital to sustaining agricultural productivity and safeguarding natural resources. Despite a variety of state programs, the country annually loses 1 million acres of farmland to development. In addition, the loss of wildlife habitat is transforming military bases into unlikely refuges for more than 300 threatened and endangered species.

A Partnership Is Born

Is there a solution that can satisfy these competing interests? The U.S. Departments of Defense, Agriculture and the Interior, along with state, local and private actors, are hoping a new effort called the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership will be a win-win for all involved. The partnership’s goals are to protect working lands, preserve wildlife habitat and sustain military readiness by focusing on places where these priorities overlap. It will reward landowners for management practices that benefit the land and their own livelihoods while helping to sustain military training ranges and airspace.

A streaked horned lark at Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

The theory is being tested at the partnership’s first site: Joint Base Lewis-McChord, located in the heart of Washington’s Puget Sound region. It’s the largest military installation on the West Coast, a top employer in the state and a major contributor to the local economy.

But why the base was chosen as the first Sentinel Landscape is its very fragile prairie ecosystem. Troops train with live fire, combat vehicles roam the land and enormous C-17 transport planes fly directly to and from areas of conflict on land that is home to a wide array of plants and animals at risk of extinction.

The streaked horned lark, Mazama pocket gopher and Taylor’s checkerspot butterfly survive on only

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3 percent of the historic 150,000-acre prairie habitat that remains, most of it inside the 91,000-acre base.

Before the land surrounding the base was chosen for the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership in July 2013, the program already had invested about \$13 million to protect and restore 2,600 acres of privately owned land around the base through voluntary conservation easements, management endowments and other tools.

The partnership also supports restoration of prairie habitat, which in turn has created work for returning servicemen and women through the Veterans Conservation Corps.

More Sentinel Landscapes

Joint Base Lewis-McChord is just one of more than 420 military installations in 47 states, the District of Columbia, Guam and Puerto Rico. The bases and their training ranges cover about 25 million acres and encompass all the terrain and climate conditions troops may encounter in combat areas—from the harsh desert of the Marine Corps Base in Twentynine Palms, California, to the frozen landscape of Camp Ripley, near Little Falls, Minnesota.

Building on the positive start to the first Sentinel Landscapes project in Washington,

two more sites were designated in April: Fort Huachuca in southeast Arizona and Naval Air Station Patuxent River-Atlantic Test Ranges in Maryland.

Fort Huachuca’s remote location in the Sonoran Desert has made it the primary training area for unmanned aircraft systems in the Western United States. Local, state and federal partners will try to reduce the amount of land and water development around the base while protecting ranches and native grasslands. Water conservation will limit the need for new wells, preserving water necessary for military operations and the continued health of species on and off the installation.

Naval Air Station Patuxent River, located on the Chesapeake Bay, also has received federal funding that, along with donations from Delaware and Maryland and the Chesapeake Conservancy, will be used to protect 1,300 acres of forests, wetlands and farmland under restricted airspace on the Delmarva Peninsula known as the Atlantic Test Ranges. Maintaining undeveloped areas beneath the airspace reduces noise and safety concerns and helps protect the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

“What excites me the most about this announcement,” says John Conger, performing the duties of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations and Environment, “is how this partnership will protect the test missions at Pax River and Fort Huachuca. The Sentinel Landscapes will be a magnet for conservation activities, but the real motivation at [the Defense Department] is creating the buffer we need to protect these critical missions.”

Managing Community Growth

The effects of incompatible development on military activities, wildlife habitat and working lands are becoming increasingly apparent in many states. Although the federal government can provide valuable assistance in mitigating those effects, the ultimate responsibility for managing community growth and development rests with state and local governments.

In fact, one of the key objectives of the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership is to encourage state participation and the use of state resources to more effectively engage private landowners and provide them with a range of incentives to promote compatible land use.

Legislation enacted in Minnesota this year

What Are Sentinel Landscapes?

They are the working or natural lands around military bases important to the nation’s defense mission—places where land conservation will:

- Benefit farms, ranches and forests.
- Preserve habitat and natural resources.
- Protect vital military testing and training activities.

How Are They Designated?

The Sentinel Landscapes Partnership Federal Coordinating Committee annually reviews potential candidates for designation. A formal nomination process is under development and will be announced soon.

aims to do just that. House Bill 283 establishes a coordinating committee to identify lands around Camp Ripley that meet the criteria of a Sentinel Landscape. The committee will work with willing landowners to encourage management practices compatible with the National Guard training facility. Representative Ron Kresha (R), one of the bill’s sponsors, believes Camp Ripley is an important resource for the state and views the legislation as a first step toward nomination for official Sentinel Landscape status. The designation, he says, will “ensure a buffer zone that works for both the property owners and the military base.”

State laws that help to minimize encroachment and sustain the economic benefits of the military’s presence also support the goals of the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership. Policy options include farmland and forestry preservation programs and tax incentives for private land conservation and economic development.

Training at Camp Lejeune, N.C.



PHOTO: CPL ED GALO, U.S. MARINE CORPS



Representative Ron Kresha, Minnesota



PHOTO: SGT. MARK MIRANDA, U.S. ARMY

Farm Programs

Farm viability programs in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York and Vermont offer assistance to farmers to improve their profitability. In addition, 27 states compensate landowners to keep productive land available for agriculture—providing them with a financially competitive alternative to selling land for development.

Many state laws also require or encourage local governments to create plans that protect farmland. They often specify what, if any, level of development is compatible with agricultural operations.

More than half of all forested land in the United States is privately owned. Along with protecting farmlands, some states also promote long-term management and retention of private forest lands, which provide such benefits as clean air and water and wildlife habitat.

In 2001, the Minnesota Legislature created an incentive program that annually offers eligible landowners \$7 per acre of forested land to offset property taxes. In return, landowners agree to follow an approved forest management plan. Michigan enacted similar legislation in 2013, creating a private forestland enhancement fund to help administer cost-sharing and incentive programs.

Tax Incentives

Tax credits are another way to encourage the preservation of land near military bases. Lawmakers in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, South Carolina, Virginia and Puerto Rico have enacted legislation creating a conservation

Training at Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

easement tax credit, allowing landowners to claim up to 50 percent of the fair market value of land donated to a government agency or private land trust. Colorado, Georgia, New Mexico, South Carolina and Virginia allow credits to be transferred to individuals or corporations with high tax liability, generating immediate income for the donor.

Landowners may also qualify for special property tax treatment. In North Carolina, for example, property taxes for agriculture, horticulture and forest lands are based on the value of the land in its current use, rather than its market value. California assesses a lower property tax rate on landowners who contract with local governments to restrict their land to agricultural and open space uses.

Alaska, Georgia and Maryland have created enterprise zones around military bases. Alaska Representative Steve Thompson (R) sponsored legislation in 2012 that created “military facility zones,” wherein municipal-

ities and private businesses are offered low-cost loans and tax credits to spur economic development.

Thompson says the law not only will help Alaska’s bases become “more efficient and better able to effectively perform their mission,” but also “clearly demonstrates the state’s continuing and substantive support for the armed services.” Farm preservation programs, tax incentives and military facility zones are but a few state policy options that can be used to complement and support a Sentinel Landscape.

It’s a Win-Win Proposal

The Sentinel Landscapes Partnership presents promising new opportunities where national defense, conservation and working lands intersect. The Department of Defense has succeeded in securing military land buffers since 2002, but those behind this new partnership believe its comprehensive approach will attract private investment, encourage market-based solutions and interest private landowners.

State participation is vital to the success of the effort, particularly as the program evolves and new Sentinel Landscapes are designated in the coming years.

If the project at Joint Base Lewis-McChord is any indication, states and localities have something to look forward to. And we can be pretty sure the horned lark and checkerspot butterfly would agree. 

➔ For more information and to link to NCSL’s 2013 report “Preparing for Duty: State Policy Options in Sustaining Military Installations,” go to www.ncsl.org/magazine.



Representative Steve Thompson, Alaska