

AVON PARK AIR FORCE RANGE SENTINEL LANDSCAPE

Florida | est. 2016



Located in south central Florida, the Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape is known for its rich biodiversity and abundance of private ranches. The sentinel landscape is anchored by the U.S. Air Force’s largest primary air-to-ground training range east of the Mississippi River, whose restricted airspace and operating area is used by every branch of the Armed Forces and multiple federal, state, and local agencies. The sentinel landscape is also home to portions of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area, one of the last remaining grassland and longleaf pine savanna landscapes in Eastern North America. The Refuge is not only a high priority area for the Department of the Interior; it is also known by locals as an excellent destination for hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, birding, and outdoor educational opportunities. In 2016, local partners formed the Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape to preserve the region’s ecological assets and strengthen military readiness by helping private landowners manage their properties sustainably.

HISTORIC RANCH PROTECTION STRENGTHENS MILITARY READINESS

One of the primary goals of the Avon Park Sentinel Landscape is to support the long-term viability of working agricultural lands through coordination with partners and willing private property owners. The protection of the 5,200-acre Rafter T Ranch perfectly exemplifies how collaborative partnerships formed within sentinel landscapes can accomplish these broad goals for the mutual benefit of all parties involved. After roughly 10 years of work, the U.S. Department of Defense’s Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resource Conservation Service, and other national and local partners, acquired an easement on the last unprotected portion of the Rafter T Ranch,

Figure 1: Avon Park Sentinel Landscape Map

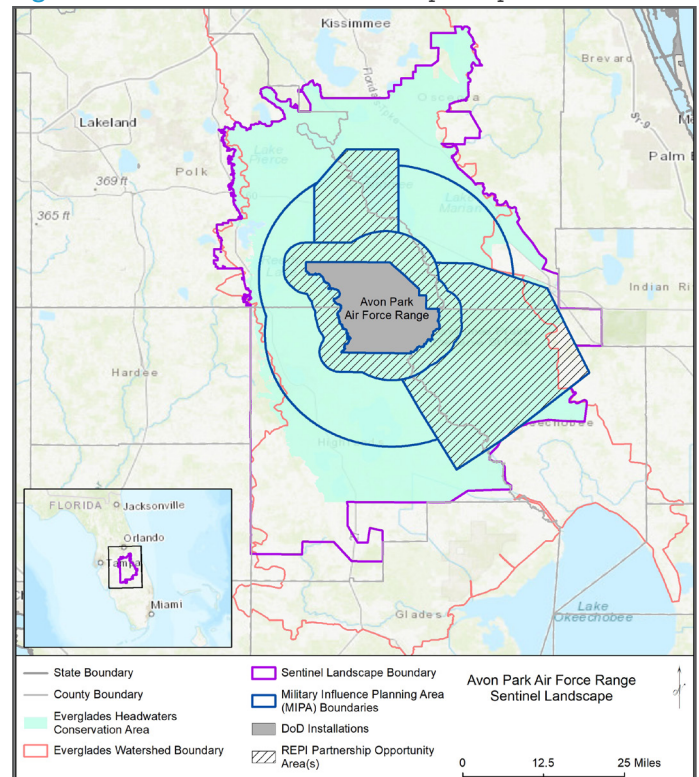


Table 1: Avon Park Sentinel Landscape Footprint Details (from year established through fiscal year 2020)

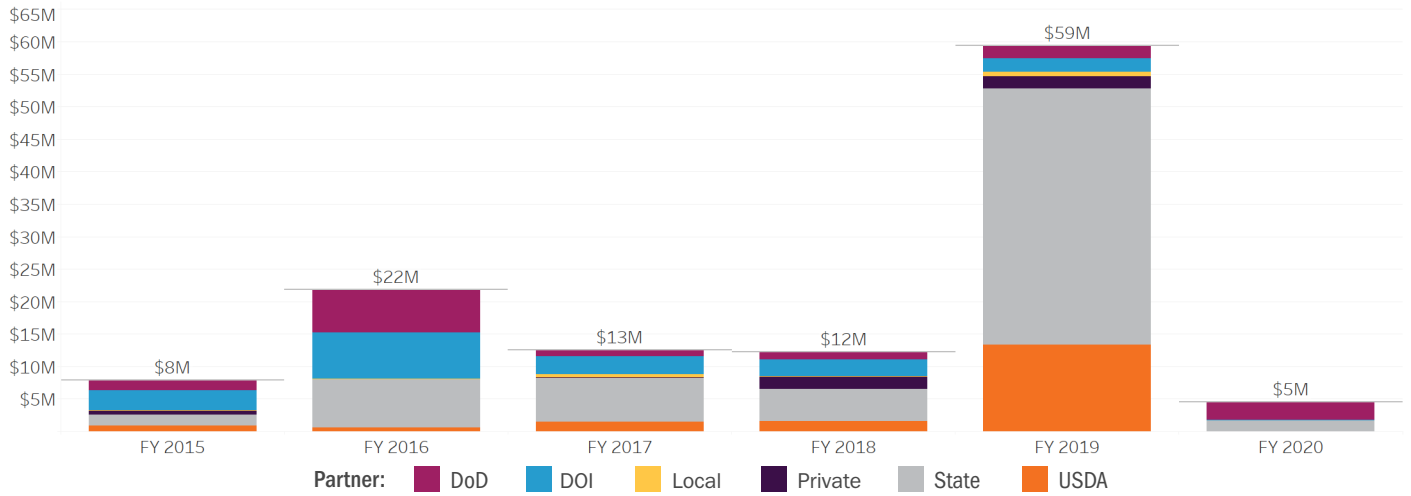
Total Protected Acres ¹	63,308
Total Enrolled Acres ²	744,112
Active Base Area	108,213
Total Sentinel Landscape Area	1,672,814

marking the completion of one of the earliest collaborative efforts among partners. Spanning the Florida Heartland, the ranch stitches together a series of conserved properties around the Avon Park Air Force Range, creating a natural corridor for

¹ Protected acres are recognized as land acquisitions—fee simple or easement—that have completed the due diligence and closing actions necessary to obtain a real estate interest.

² Land is considered enrolled if the property owner voluntarily participates in a federal or state land-management program that provides financial or technical assistance to promote sustainable agricultural practices, restore imperiled species and their habitat, or preserve critical natural resources; or if a landowner or an organization receives a federal or state grant to conduct a conservation project on said property.

Figure 2: Avon Park Sentinel Landscape Total Funding by Partner



imperiled species such as the Florida panther, Florida black bear, Florida scrub-jay, and southern fox squirrel. Contiguous land protection at this scale precludes development that may disrupt the Range’s ability to effectively use its low-altitude airspace, which is necessary for the installation to carry out its national defense mission. It also supports water conservation efforts by buffering the Kissimmee River and other tributaries to Lake Okeechobee, while also precluding development in an area critical to aquifer recharge, thus augmenting groundwater supplies. Support from the owner of the ranch has been instrumental in building trust among other farmers and ranchers interested in taking part in the sentinel landscape.

PROTECTING THE EVERGLADES HEADWATERS

In April 2019, the Open Space Institute, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permanently protected 4,000 acres of the Triple Diamond Ranch, which will enhance biodiversity and water security in the region. Situated in the heart of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge, Triple Diamond Ranch

joins a contiguous network of 200,000 acres of protected land across central Florida. This land serves as an important wildlife corridor in one of the fastest growing regions in the country where accelerated development can disrupt migration patterns. The property itself is covered in dry prairie habitat—a globally imperiled natural community—that supports numerous at-risk species, including the Florida grasshopper sparrow, gopher tortoise, and the eastern indigo snake. Permanent protection of the Triple Diamond Ranch will also enhance water quality for the immediate area and downstream into the country’s largest subtropical wetland. The property provides natural filtration for water that flows directly into the Kissimmee River, feeding Lake Okeechobee and, ultimately, the Everglades.

“The Sentinel Landscapes [Partnership] provides a vehicle to expedite estate planning, provide liquidity for disinterested shareholders, and prevent fragmentation of a holistic landscape and cow/calve production unit. I see it as a blessing for all.”

— Mr. James Wohl, Owner and Operator of Rafter T Ranch

Key Partners

- ★ Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area
- ★ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency
- ★ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service
- ★ U.S. Department of Defense, Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation
- ★ U.S. Department of Defense, Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration
- ★ U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service
- ★ Central Florida Regional Planning Council
- ★ Enterprise Florida
- ★ Florida Defense Alliance
- ★ Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
- ★ Florida Department of Economic Opportunity
- ★ Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- ★ Florida Department of Transportation
- ★ Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- ★ Florida Forest Service
- ★ South Florida Water Management District
- ★ Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS)
- ★ Southwest Florida Water Management District
- ★ The Florida Defense Support Task Force
- ★ University of Florida Center for Landscape Conservation Planning
- ★ University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences
- ★ City of Avon Park
- ★ City of Frostproof
- ★ City of Sebring
- ★ Highlands County
- ★ Highlands Soil & Water Conservation District
- ★ Okeechobee County
- ★ Osceola County
- ★ Polk County
- ★ Archbold Biological Station
- ★ Florida Cattlemen’s Association
- ★ Florida Farm Bureau Federation
- ★ National Wildlife Refuge Association
- ★ The Nature Conservancy