

# AVON PARK AIR FORCE RANGE SENTINEL LANDSCAPE

Florida | est. 2015



Located in south central Florida, the Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape covers 1.7 million acres of land and 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. The installation's restricted airspace and operating area—including a 106,000-acre bombing and gunnery range—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. 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

For over ten years, Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape partners have worked together to protect the Rafter T Ranch. In September 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program, the Nature Conservancy, U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Florida Defense Support Task Force, Highlands County, and the Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC) acquired an easement on the last unprotected portion of the property, marking the completion of one of the earliest collaborative efforts among partners. Spanning 5,200 acres across the Florida Heartland, the Rafter T Ranch stitches together a series of conserved properties around the Avon Park Air Force Range, creating a natural corridor for imperiled species such as the Florida panther, Florida black

Figure 1: Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape Map

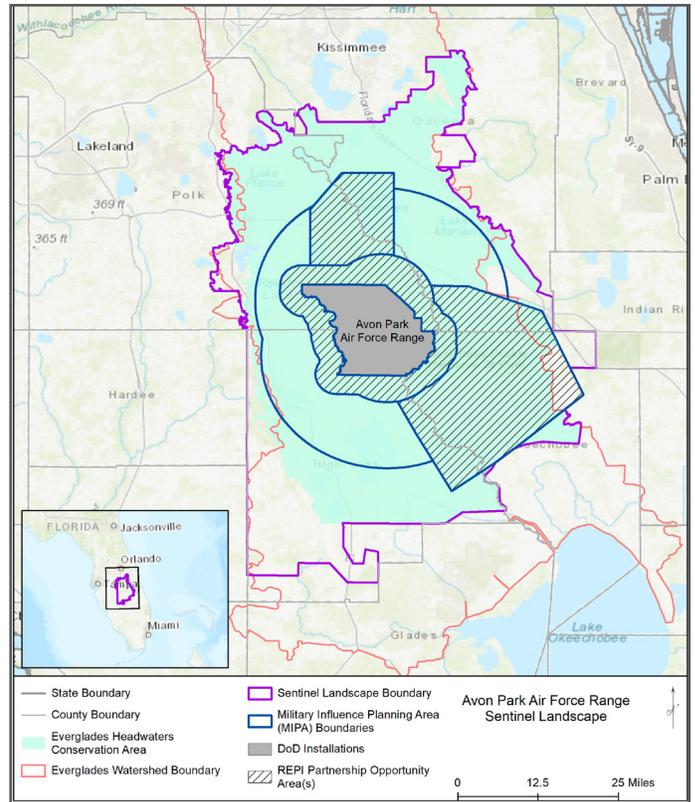


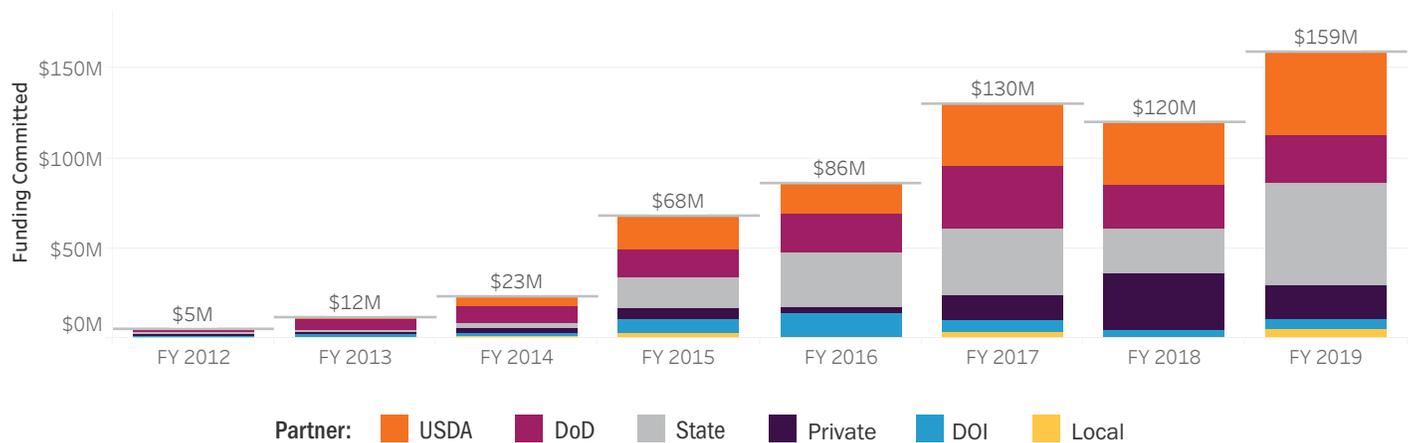
Table 1: APAFR Sentinel Landscape Footprint Details (acres)

	<b>Total Protected Acres:<sup>1</sup></b>	61,781
	<b>Total Enrolled Acres:<sup>2</sup></b>	744,112
	<b>Active Base Area:</b>	108,213
	<b>Total Sentinel Landscape Area:</b>	1,672,814

<sup>1</sup> Represents total acres protected through projects administered by sentinel landscape partners since FY 2014

<sup>2</sup> Represents total acres enrolled in technical assistance programs administered by sentinel landscape partners since FY 2014

**Figure 2:** Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape Total Funding by Partner



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. Vocal support from Mr. James Wohl, owner and operator of the ranch, and his affiliates have been instrumental in building trust among other farmers and ranchers interested in taking part in the sentinel landscape. Since its beginning, Mr. Wohl has been an enthusiastic advocate of the sentinel landscape, going as far as to host outreach events on his property for local communities.

**“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

### 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.

### Partners Increase Accessibility to Landowner Benefits

All government assistance programs active in sentinel landscapes are voluntary. That means their success depends not only on landowner interest but also on landowner awareness. In June 2019, CFRPC hosted the first large-scale landowner assistance expo in central Florida, known as LAX 2019. The event gathered 17 organizations to present benefits related to wildlife restoration, alternative crops, farm loans, tax preparation, and conservation easements. To those that participated, LAX 2019 was an overwhelming success. Attendees came away with a better understanding of assistance programs in their region, while government organizations had the opportunity to participate in community-driven outreach. In October 2019, LAX 2019 received an Impact Award from the National Association of Development Organizations during its annual training conference. Given this positive feedback, CFRPC plans to host a second iteration of the event in the future.