



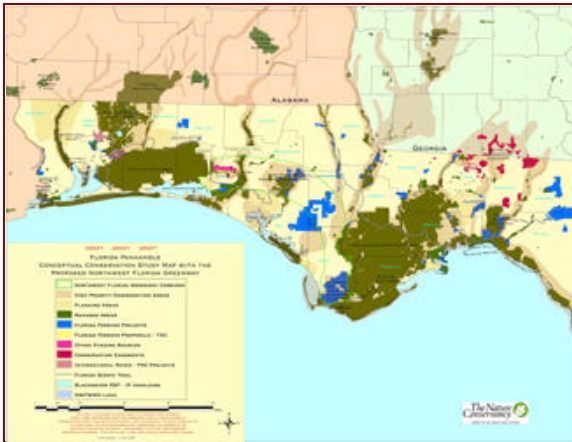
PRINTABLE VERSION: Thursday, July 5, 2007

1. **MILITARY LANDS: Base buffer program effective defense against encroachments** (07/05/2007)

Arthur O'Donnell and Katherine Boyle, *Land Letter* reporters

Amassing 1 million acres of land in a continuous swath, parcel by parcel, would be a daunting challenge for any real estate mogul, especially along the coastal plains of Florida. For the Department of Defense, it is an example of how to successfully leverage partnerships among many land conservation interests in order to create adequate buffers from development around key operating military facilities.

Working with groups as diverse as the Nature Conservancy, Florida state and county agencies, federal land agencies and private companies, DOD -- along with Eglin Air Force Base, Naval Air Station at Pensacola and Whiting Field -- put together a substantial portfolio of conservation easements and property acquisitions to preserve more than 1 million acres of land under the auspices of the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership.



The Northwest Florida Greenway project will establish a 100-mile conservation corridor linking major military airfields while preserving lands from rampant development. Click on the image for a larger version of the map.

Now many of the players -- along with some prominent family foundations -- are involved in establishing the Northwest Florida Greenway Project to connect two protected areas and preserve operational flexibility for major airfields in the panhandle region. The greenway project creates a 100-mile corridor across the plains, from the million-acre Apalachicola National Forest to Eglin AFB. Already facing rapid growth and loss of green space in the region, Eglin officials worried about their ability to continue low-level flight and weapons testing.

The greenway project also would serve the naval air stations at Pensacola and Whiting Field.

Deborah Keller, senior policy representative with the Nature Conservancy working on the greenway project, calls the area "incredibly underdeveloped" but subject to increasing pressure from retirees and people who live a few hours away and build second homes along the coast. Long called "The Forgotten Coast," the area is one of the conservancy's biological diversity hot spots, and home to 75 percent of the state's plant species and three dozen endangered or threatened species.

Over the past four years, since the conservancy signed a partnership agreement with DOD and Florida's Department of Environmental Protection, the project has secured about 35,000 acres through a combination of conservation easements, acquisitions and land donations, leveraging approximately \$48 million in federal, state, local and private funding.

This achievement is leveraged by an additional 152,000 acres on a list approved by the Florida Forever preservation program. Also, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gave approval for a private landowner to restore and manage 4,400 acres. On the horizon is completion of an ecological assessment of some 1,400 square miles of currently unprotected lands in the greenway project's study area to prioritize lands for future preservation efforts.

And even while all this is going on, the groups continue to enroll and negotiate for lands as part of the Gulf Coast project north and west of Eglin, bringing the total to more than 1 million acres.

Think tank thinks highly of REPI

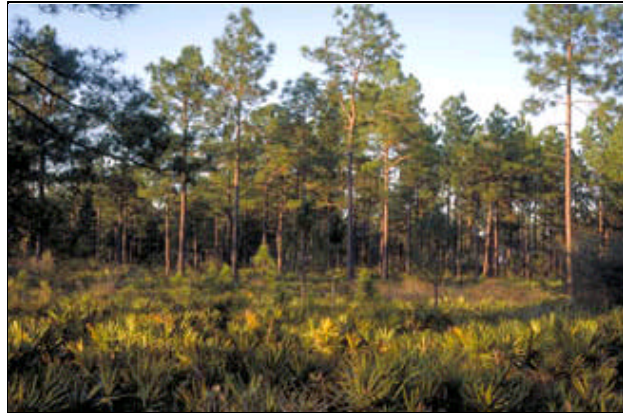
These kinds of collaborative efforts to achieve conservation while establishing military buffer lands are part of a little known but highly successful Defense program called Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative (REPI). Among the service branches of the department, there are 27 REPI projects at 20 military installations across the country.

An initial partnership at Fort Bragg in North Carolina to create conservation buffers around the base to protect a threatened woodpecker, has become a nationwide program involving all of the services.

And according to a set of new reports on REPI, bringing more federal dollars and encouraging more multilateral partnerships would make the programs even more successful. One of the reports, from RAND National Defense Research Institute, said the REPI program needs at least \$150 million per year to buy land and easements ahead of encroaching development.

The buffers are aimed at blocking sprawling suburban development and protecting wildlife and plant habitat. They also head off competition for air space, radio frequencies and water supplies, noted the [report](#).

A separate but related [report](#) Defense submitted to Congress last week emphasized the threat of encroachment on training. "Often, surrounding development brings concerns with noise, light and safety that directly affect many test or training processes and scheduled events," the report said, citing alteration of flight patterns, speeds or altitudes. Live fire activities and training for electronic warfare have also been affected by encroachment, DOD said.



Longleaf pine forests make up much of the protected buffer lands around Fort Stewart in Georgia and Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. Photo courtesy of the Nature Conservancy.

In fiscal 2007, Congress provided \$40 million to the DOD initiative, and President Bush requested \$30 million for fiscal 2008. But "given land prices and buffering needs, [the budget] needs to be substantially higher," the report says, noting that some easements can cost as much as \$15 million.

Thus far, the military has been successful in leveraging additional funds for its REPI projects, having garnered \$86 million in partner funds over the last three years.

DOD is hoping for the increase in federal funds, spokesman Chris Isleib said. "Conservation is a number one priority for us," he said. "It's the way we need to do business and the way we need to protect our resources, whether they be fuel or land or endangered species. ... It's all part of the ultimate goal of sustainability and preservation."

The study's lead author, Beth Lachman, said funding must be increased soon.

"It's important to [make purchases] now, especially in places that are still rural near the bases," Lachman said. "You have a landowner who owns 1,000 acres and is about to sell; well, if it gets developed and subdivided into 1-acre plots, you have 1,000 landowners instead of one to deal with."

Lachman also noted that buying land and easements now could save money for DOD later as land prices rise.

Congressional authorization

Although most bases were located far from major cities when they were opened decades ago, sprawling suburbs have moved out to meet them. Recognizing the problem, Congress authorized an expanded DOD effort in 2002 to partner with local governments or private groups to establish buffer areas around bases.



Fort Carson, Colo., faces opposition to its expansion plans for armored training grounds, but cooperation in securing conservation easements for a buffer around the base. Photo courtesy of Fort Carson.

The directive allowing the military to fund land purchases through partnerships led to the creation of REPI. It was a key breakthrough, as the military is not supposed to own land through the initiative. The partnership with the military "has been a very positive relationship," said Keller of the Nature Conservancy in Florida. "We partner with the military on base buffering [and try] to make sure the bases themselves do not become islands of biodiversity surrounded by a sea of houses and strip malls," Keller said.

Sprawl creates problems for the military and for natural resources. Development may cause "species to become threatened and endangered," Lachman said, explaining that when animals and plants on the base are classified as threatened and endangered, it can limit military training and testing.

DOD manages about 33 million acres. "We've got about 400 endangered or threatened species on our land, and we ... do everything we can to protect their habitat," Isleib said. "We manage our own behavior, change our training patterns and are careful about what times and

what days and what times of the year we do certain things with training or tree harvesting."

The military's need to protect threatened and endangered species compels cooperation with other federal agencies like the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, Lachman said. And because each base or facility is located in a unique environment, each offers different challenges.

Deserts and forests

For example, at Fort Carson, Colo., the declining black-tailed prairie dog population is a major concern. The creatures' habitat covers more than 50 million acres, Lachman said, so "what happens in Kansas can affect Fort Carson" even though the military has no control over environmental practices in that region.

"One of our recommendations in the report is to look at what's happening on other lands," she said.

While the military has done a good job addressing sprawl issues, the report advised it to look more closely at these biodiversity concerns.

In some cases, the habitat made available through the buffering projects and the bases has kept animals off the threatened or endangered species lists, such as in the case of the United States' black bear population, the report said. The program also has helped preserve specific ecosystems, like the Central Shortgrass Prairie near Fort Carson.

An entirely different ecological challenge faces Fort Stewart in Georgia. Home to the 3rd Infantry Division, the base is the Army's largest east of the Mississippi River, with more than 18,000 soldiers in its mechanized divisions.

Just 40 miles from fast-growing Savannah, the base and nearby Hunter Army Air Field were threatened with being swallowed by encroaching development, said Tim Beatty, chief of the fish and wildlife branch at Fort Stewart. Having housing and development too close to the base would hamper various training programs, he said, and there were parallel concerns about protecting the area's longleaf pine forests. "It's still largely rural around the base, but that's changing," Beatty said.

The Fort Stewart solution, funded in part through REPI, is to secure easements on as much as 120,000 acres over the next 20 years. It is a big challenge in that so far, about 623 acres in three parcels have been secured, with another 2,000 acres worth of deals in the works.

The early agreements with landowners have made others in the area more receptive to the program, he said, especially as families can continue to farm or work their properties even while agreeing to other restrictions on use or future development.

Sometimes negotiations are slow, Beatty said.

"We don't want to rush anyone," he said. "Forever is a long time."

That time lapse to successfully win easements is an issue for the REPI program overall, said RAND report co-author