

Tuesday, June 4, 2002

Commentary

Army's management of natural resources

By Raymond J. Fatz
Washington, D.C.

I am writing to commend the Observer for its May 21 editorial, "Knock On Wood." The purchase of land buffers around Fort Bragg to preserve the longleaf pine ecosystem and the red-cockaded woodpecker have helped us to free up critical land also needed for training for our soldiers. I recently had the opportunity to see the area myself during an Earth Day visit to Fort Bragg. I was impressed by both the beauty of the area and by all the hard work that has gone into making this initiative a reality.

This initiative is one of many creative solutions our Army installations develop in order to maintain the balance between national defense and environmental stewardship. These are both values the Army and the American people hold dear, and as you mentioned in your editorial, Army installations are finding ways every day to achieve both. The partnership formed with our colleagues at the Nature Conservancy and other private, state and federal organizations in the Sandhills region is one that we value. The Army has formed similar alliances to find common ground and common-sense solutions to environmental issues at Army installations across the country.

The success of the private lands initiative at Fort Bragg is a success we wish to replicate at other Army and Defense Department installations. For that reason, the Defense Department has included, as part of the current legislative proposal under review by Congress, a provision that will give the Department of Defense greater latitude to create conservation buffers, like those at Fort Bragg, in other regions.

This positive aspect of the legislative initiative has often been overlooked in the current debate on the Defense Department's proposal. With respect to other elements of the proposal, the department is not seeking wholesale exemptions from environmental laws, but rather seeking balance in the application of those environmental laws in areas affecting national security interests.

These narrowly focused clarifications for military-unique activities are necessary to allow us to continue to provide realistic combat training for our soldiers. In addition, they will allow better management over the natural resources that America has entrusted to our care.

As your newspaper so aptly observed, the Fort Bragg example illustrates that these two national priorities need not be mutually exclusive, but that it is possible to achieve a balance between the Army's mission and its environmental responsibilities.

The current proposals in Congress reinforce that objective. They suggest ways in which we can continue to maintain the balance while giving our soldiers what they deserve -- the most realistic training possible, so that they can win our nation's wars and return home safely to enjoy the resources we all treasure.

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