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Army program protects training lands

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SAN ANTONIO -- The Army mission is to deploy, fight, and win our nation's wars. To ensure mission success, the Army must conduct tough, realistic, and dynamic training on lands designated for Army use.

Most Army installations were established in sparsely populated areas in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Decades of commercial development and urbanization

have encroached on training land boundaries, putting constraints on the training requirements of some installations. In what can sometimes be conflicting and competing interests, the Army nevertheless finds a way to be good neighbors while meeting its training and testing requirements.

The Army Compatible Use Buffer Program was established to mitigate encroachment on Army installations from forces inside and outside of the boundaries. Military installations by their nature create lots of noise, dust, smoke, and other irritants that can be disturbing to its neighbors while, on the other hand, the lights and noises of mass development can interfere with Army training and testing.

Coral Eginton, U.S. Army Environmental Command ACUB team lead, said the goal of the program is to keep the surrounding community at a safe distance, to enable Army readiness through conservation of the natural landscape, protection of habitats and preservation of working lands. Under ACUB, installations work with partners to encumber off-post lands to establish a buffer zone that happens to benefit all parties involved.

Overall, the Army's 40 ACUB programs have protected 390,903 acres to date. ACUB transactions total more than a billion dollars, including the cost of the land or conservation easements and a host of other costs associated with managing the land. There are 50 ACUB partners, which combined have contributed funds or services to cover approximately 45% of total program costs.

"The most dynamic thing about this program is not just that it preserves the natural landscape," said Eginton. "It offers landowners the flexibility to sell their land or to continue to use their land for their purposes under a conservation easement. It's not just a benefit to the Army or the habitat, it's a benefit to the landowner as well. Everybody walks away happy."

The U.S. Army Environmental Command oversees up to 25 active ACUB cooperative agreements, which allows the Army to develop partnerships with land trusts and other conservation entities. The partners establish conservation

easements or acquire land in their name, then manage and maintain it in perpetuity to ensure it remains an effective buffer. The Army funds the partner to accomplish the common goal of preserving open spaces, habitat, and working lands, but doesn't hold title to any of the properties.

"There are passionate environmentalists in the Department of Defense, working towards Army readiness," said Eginton. "I had very little understanding of what the military services did to steward the environment before I worked for one."

"As an installation archaeologist at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, I saw firsthand how invested and interwoven these programs are on the ground. My respect for the Army's environmental stewardship has only grown since entering into the ACUB world," said Eginton. "Military installations manage some of the most well-preserved habitats in the country, and they engage those habitats to train soldiers effectively. It's a beautiful partnering of conservation and use."

Take, for example, several installations that have mastered the ACUB program.

Habitat preservation

Fort Benning sits on 182,000 acres of pristine Georgia land between the Piedmont Mountains and coastal plains.

Brent Widener, technical cooperative agreement manager for the Benning ACUB program, said their highest priority is buffering a one to three-mile zone on the eastern edge of the installation that hosts a suite of threatened and endangered species. The base realignment and closure initiative in 2005 moved the U.S. Army Armor School from Fort Knox to Fort Benning, triggering a huge impact on the red-cockaded woodpecker, an endangered species. When it became apparent the installation's mission would not provide a safe environment for the species, ACUB sought to reach a balance.

"As the mission expands and grows, the intent is to secure off-post properties through our partners that can broaden the landscape upon which all those

species depend,” said Widener. “So instead of having land that can support those species, the intent is to help establish those same habitats outside the boundaries that can support the species that are in many cases only on Fort Benning.”

To date, Benning has protected more than 35,000 ACUB acres. Partners maintain the land that supports endangered species like the gopher tortoise and red-cockaded woodpecker, building habitats the species depend on outside and inside the Fort Benning installation boundaries.

Widener points to significant progress made, in which they’ve reached 75% of the goal to protect the gopher tortoise. Red-cockaded woodpeckers are dependent on mature pine trees. The conservation partners are working to grow more pine trees outside of the installation that can support the RCW population over the long term. Widener, a wildlife biologist, expects a new cluster of RCWs to come on-line over the next several years.

The longleaf pine ecosystem at the installation needs to burn, according to Widener, who explains, “It needs to be set on fire with prescribed controlled burns that are managed and maintained to make sure it doesn’t adversely affect the habitat.” Prescribed fires every few years, Widener said, help prevent catastrophic wildfires and, in the event of a wildfire, reduces its intensity so that it’s easier to control.

Fort Benning’s partners include Georgia Nature Conservancy, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Georgia Forestry Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, and Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Grandfather of the ACUB Program

The ACUB program at Fort Bragg, “the grandfather ACUB,” started in 1999 with the acquisition of 550 acres. Since that time, the installation, in conjunction with its partners, has acquired close to 25,000 acres of buffer, mostly to the south and southwest of the installation borders.

The sprawling installation sits on about 170,000 acres of the North Carolina sandhills, a once vanishing longleaf pine ecosystem, now flourishing and recovering under the faithful stewardship of the North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership group. Fort Bragg is host to a population of approximately 55,000 military personnel and another 8,000 civilians working on the installation.

“We’ve done a good job so far on the southern boundary pushing out to about a mile to a mile and a half in most areas,” said Fort Bragg ACUB coordinator Barry Hull. “It gives us enough of a buffer that we can do what we need to do and not negatively impact our neighbors.” Most of the eastern edge of the post is metropolitan Fayetteville.

The program protects five endangered species.

When the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker came under the protection of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1990, Fort Bragg was forced to shut down its operations to preserve the woodpeckers’ habitat. All that’s been resolved through the ACUB program.

“By 2006, we reached our recovery population, and by 2009 we had relieved a majority of the restrictions on the installation related to the RCW,” Hull said. “We’ll always have some restrictions to be compatible with our neighbors’ endangered species and their habitats.”

A retired military officer, Hull knows firsthand how a conservation program can enhance not just the environment, but the experience of the enlisted men and women. Hull said that as a young Soldier training at Fort Bragg in the 1980s, they were often under siege by ticks. The insects were so bad, tick inspection stations were set up around the camp.

“One of the great things we’ve learned here,” Hull observed, “is that 90% of what’s good for the habitat is good for the Soldiers.” He said managing the land with the

science of prescribed burns has not only improved endangered species populations, it's meant fewer tick bites for the Soldiers.

The North Carolina Sandhills Conversation Partnership facilitates collaboration between various federal, state, and non-profit conservation groups, consisting of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; U.S. Army at Fort Bragg; U.S. Army Environmental Command; North Carolina Office of Conservation, Planning and Community Affairs; North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission; North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation; North Carolina Forest Service; The Nature Conservancy; Sandhills Ecological Institute; and the Three Rivers Land Trust.

Great Community Involvement

Facing massive expansion of the national capital region commuting area, installation Environmental Division Chief Terry Banks saw the opportunity in the early 2000s for an ACUB program at Fort A.P. Hill. Over its now 14-year existence, the ACUB program has protected more than 14,000 acres of private lands, mostly through conservation easements.

Fort A.P. Hill sits on about 76,000 acres near the Rappahannock River, a significant natural and cultural feature that also hosts part of a National Park Service scenic trail. Fort A.P. Hill harbors federally protected plants, the swamp pink and the small whorled pogonia, and two federally protected bats, the Indiana bat and Northern long-eared bat.

The installation near Fredericksburg, Virginia, has seen significant population growth and light pollution from expanding urbanization and development. Focusing ACUB efforts on the north and northeastern borders, Fort A.P. Hill has reached about a third of its ultimate goal, with an abundance of willing landowners around them.

As a regional training facility for all branches of the military, Fort A.P. Hill's ACUB program is mission driven but has a rich assortment of natural and cultural resources that can support land protection efforts. Jason Applegate, another

program coordinator at the installation, said it's important to manage the needs of both the mission and environment.

"We end up doing multiple levels of good, making sure we're mission ready," said Applegate.

"ACUB allows us to maintain that capability with less impacts to the community," Applegate said. "It is still relatively rural around Fort A.P. Hill. The ACUB program is vital to ensure we can maintain that rural environmental and military mission."

"We are between the Northern Virginia / D.C. metro area and then the Richmond area, so we're really feeling the squeeze." Applegate said they hope to eventually amass a 35,000-acre buffer from incompatible development.

Banks, who has a biology background, appreciates the good fortune they enjoy at A.P. Hill. "Our military mission has afforded us the opportunity to have these wonderful natural resources we need to protect. ACUB allows us to protect those resources and the military mission. It's really a great combination." The award-winning program has earned a number of state and federal recognitions.

"It's a very rich environment for us," said Applegate.

Fort A.P. Hill is a member of the Rappahannock Land Protection Partnership, which also includes the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, The Conservation Fund, The Trust for Public Land, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Chesapeake Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, and Northern Neck Land Conservancy. This partnership coordinates their efforts among members and leverages resources where possible to meet their objectives.