

Outside Camp Ripley, pine trees and prairie stand sentinel

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Todd Holman, Baxter City Council member, Mississippi Headwaters Program Director for the Nature Conservancy, and coordinator of the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape Program, explains the history and purpose of the latter at Camp Ripley Thursday. Zach Kayser/Brainerd Dispatch

CAMP RIPLEY -- Two years ago, Minnesota lawmakers jump started efforts to keep the area around Minnesota's main military base green and free from development.

On Thursday, Camp Ripley's Sentinel Landscape Program celebrated the progress it had made since then, and informed community members about how to become a part of the effort. An information fair inside the "Hangar" conference center helped attendees find out more about how they can protect and restore the watersheds and land environments around the base.

The local beginnings of what eventually became the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape Program actually began more than a decade ago, under the Army Compatible Use Buffer Program.

This was geared toward making sure local residents weren't bothered by the noise the Minnesota National Guard made with exploding artillery rounds, tank engines, and low-flying C-130 transport planes. Its objective: to get landowners within a 3-mile radius to curb development, so that people didn't build houses or other human structures close to the base.

But as newly installed Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape program coordinator Todd Holman explained, it was also apparent that goal aligned with conservation. Keeping development away also helps preserve the Mississippi -- the area is at the intersection of several watersheds -- by protecting it from runoff.

The original area the National Guard and conservation groups wanted to conserve was 78,000 acres out of the 110,000 acres in a 3-mile radius around Camp Ripley, Holman said. For context, the military base itself is 53,000 acres.

The land they saved also became part of several areas open to the public: the Little Nokasippi Wildlife Management Area, Mississippi Overlook Park and Crow Wing State Park.

In 2015, the Legislature created a law that turned the area into a Sentinel Landscape in the eyes of the state of Minnesota. That, in turn, helped draw the attention of the U.S. government.

Last July, they designated the area as a site for the national-level Sentinel Landscape program.

"There are 88 buffer programs across the whole country around military bases," Holman said. "Only six are Sentinel Landscapes."

The land area's new designation means the conservation program has better access to extensive federal grants from the Department of Defense and the Department of Agriculture. For example, the USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program recently awarded the Morrison Soil and Water Conservation District and Camp Ripley's sentinel zone \$2.8 million.

It also meant they could expand beyond the methods of Army Compatible Use Buffer Program. Before, they tried to buy the land outright or get conservation easements -- buying the right to use the land without buying the land itself. The Sentinel Landscape designation allowed them to add to their list of strategies by offering advice to specific landowners with site visits and stewardship plans.

But with the added power came added responsibility, Holman said.

The radius of land they were to look after expanded to 10 miles around Camp Ripley -- 804,000 acres. That's more than the entire land area of Crow Wing County.

So outside the 3-mile ring, the goal is to reach a certain percentage of land with protected status and have a certain reduction in runoff, rather than measuring their success just by acres within the sentinel zone.

Holman is a member of the Baxter City Council, but he wants officials from neighboring cities to also become engaged. While the sentinel program hasn't approached the local governments directly, Holman said, city managers and council members were invited to Thursday's gathering so they could find out more, he said.

"If they hear things that resonate with their goals and objectives, it would be great for them to join the partnership," he said.

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