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Pax River, ATR REPI Program tops 10K acres

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The Hemlock Preserve 67- acre parcel in Calvert County is comprised of upland woods, ravines, bluffs and marsh along Hel Creek. To learn more, visit www.covepoint-trust.org.

PTLT courtesy photo

Naval Air Station Patuxent River and Atlantic Test Ranges (ATR) have achieved a major milestone in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, protecting 11,144 acres since 2010 through the Department of Defense Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program.

The REPI Program is a key tool for combating encroachment that can limit or restrict military training, testing, and operations. It supports cost-sharing agreements between military services, private conservation organizations, and state and local governments in order to secure land

interests, such as easements, from willing landowners near military installations and ranges. REPI easements allow landowners to maintain ownership of their property while limiting intense residential, commercial, or industrial development on the property in order to ensure land remains compatible with the flight test mission of NAS Patuxent River and ATR. The protected land is part of the Middle Chesapeake Sentinel Landscape. The Sentinel Landscapes partnership — between the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, and the Interior — seeks to preserve the working and rural character of key landscapes vital to military testing and training.

Through extensive partnership between local communities and conservation groups, the REPI program has successfully preserved 56 parcels beneath the Navy airspace since 2010. FY 19 yielded the creation of easements on 15 properties for a total of 2,514 acres of land conserved beneath Navy airspace in Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia.

“These efforts are helping to ensure the vitality of the range by permanently preserving swaths of land beneath the 2,300 square miles of restricted airspace that is essential for naval aviation testing,” said Rob Vargo, Director, NAWCAD Atlantic Ranges and Targets Department. “Our REPI program has made significant strides to protect the mission and has grown over the last 10 years to include 17 partners. We are looking forward to continuing these partnerships in the future to benefit both the Navy and our community.”

The majority of the NAS Patuxent River and ATR REPI projects to date have been completed with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources in state-designated Rural Legacy Areas. The Maryland Rural Legacy Program provides dedicated funding to local conservation groups to protect valuable open spaces and conserve habitat. Twenty-one projects have been completed in the Mattapany Rural Legacy Area of St. Mary’s County in Southern Maryland, and 22 in the Nanticoke and Quantico Creek Rural Legacy Areas on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. The partnership continues to diversify, and new collaborative efforts culminated in FY 2019.

In FY 2019, the first REPI project with the Maryland Environmental Trust, a land trust and quasi-public entity that works to protect Maryland’s most treasured landscapes and natural resources as a legacy for future generations primarily through landowner donation, was completed — Hemlock Preserve.

“This is a new way for us to conserve land,” said Patuxent Tidewater Land Trust President Frank Allen. “It’s a hybrid purchase/donation.”

The 67-acre parcel, Hemlock Preserve, located along Hellen Creek in Calvert County is home to over 50 species of birds and has a stand of Canadian hemlocks, thought to be a relict community left behind by the last glaciers 15,000 years ago. Patuxent Tidewater Land Trust facilitated the project, and the Cove Point Natural Heritage Trust will manage the property.

“The Hemlock Preserve is our first REPI project in Calvert County. We have used REPI successfully in St. Mary’s County, and others – on the Eastern Shore for example – for many years to help prevent encroachment on our training areas and flying routes, and we look forward to expanding the use of this program with Calvert County,” said Capt. Christopher Cox, NAS Patuxent River commanding officer.

“This partnership is of tremendous benefit to the mission of NAS Patuxent River. We are grateful for our partners for their dedication and hard work, and our neighbors who have agreed to preserve their land in a way that helps their County, the state of Maryland, and the Navy protect our test mission and ensure our warfighters are equipped with the most lethal, technologically advanced and reliable aircraft and weapon systems in the world. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them.”

FY 2019 also marked the first of several jointly funded through REPI and a North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grants in the airspace. The Navy, Ducks Unlimited, Eastern Shore Land Conservancy, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) preserved a 414-acre parcel with a conservation easement on the eastern shore of Maryland. The property is located in the core habitat area of the Delmarva fox squirrel range (a once endangered species delisted in 2015), and the land’s protection creates a 2,700-acre contiguous wildlife corridor protected from development.

“By aligning and focusing our collective priorities through the Sentinel Landscapes partnership, both the Navy and Service have been able to accelerate the conservation gains made around the Chesapeake Bay. This type of collaborative effort is allowing us to affect conservation at a Bay wide scale, and complete projects beyond our individual capacities. We are excited to continue to innovate with the Navy and the Sentinel Landscapes partnership to sustain our fish and wildlife resources for the public.” Christina Ryder, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“Ducks Unlimited (DU) is thrilled to be included in this unique partnership. DU has always been a proponent of sharing resources to maximize conservation benefits. This project is a prime example of the effectiveness of this approach,” said Jake McPherson, Ducks Unlimited Regional Biologist.

To learn more about the DoD REPI Program, visit www.repi.mil. For more information on the Sentinel Landscapes partnership, visit sentinellandscapes.org. For more information about the Maryland Rural Legacy Program, visit <https://dnr.maryland.gov/land/Pages/RuralLegacy/home.aspx>.
