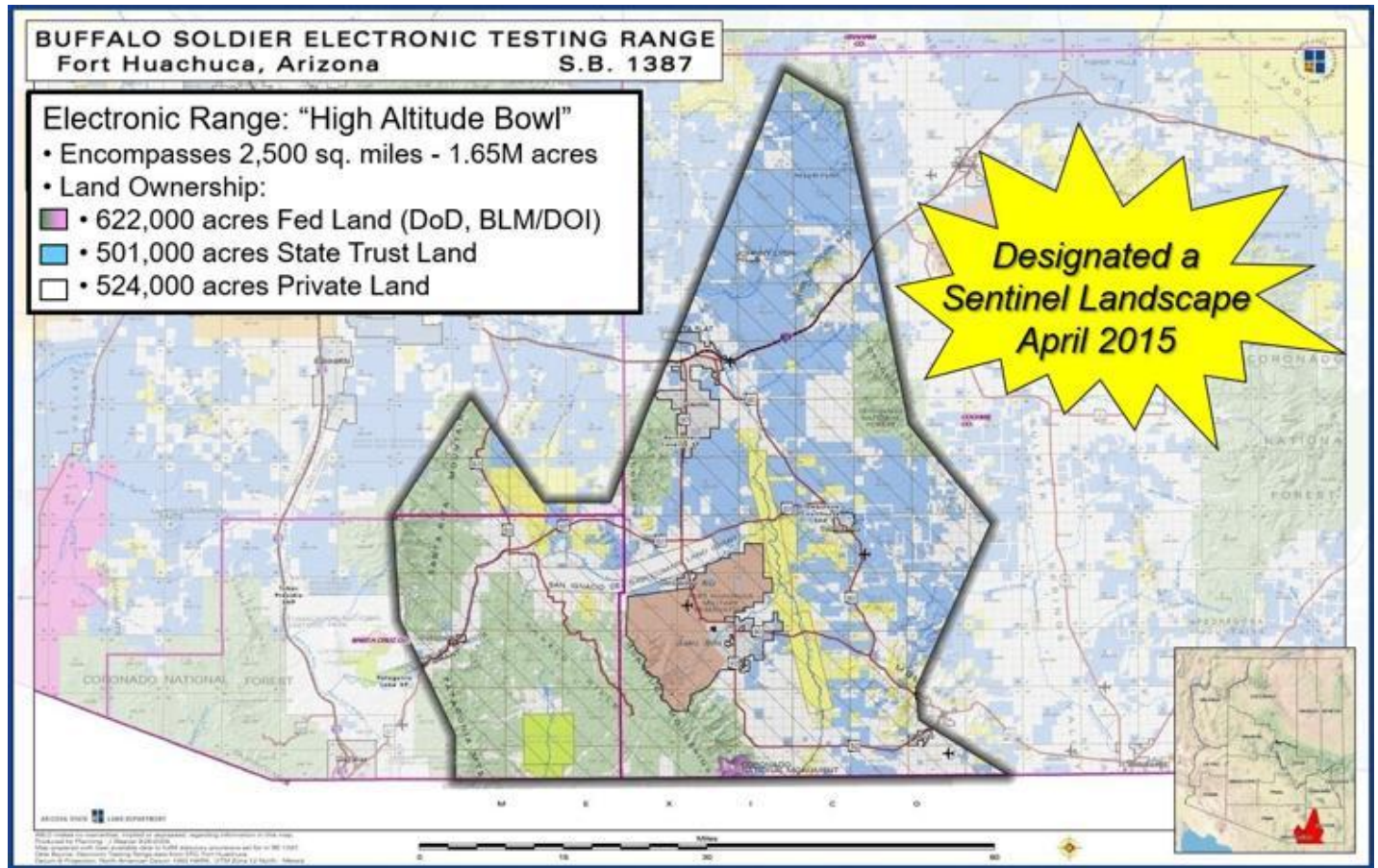


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TOP STORY

Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape Restoration Project continues to make strides

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Fort Huachuca Landscape Sentinel Restoration Project graphic

SIERRA VISTA – Fort Huachuca, one of seven military installations in the United States that participates in a multi-governmental coalition that partners with private property owners to bolster sustainable land management practices, continues moving forward to achieve wildfire mitigation and protection of water quality and supply for surrounding communities and improving habitats for endangered and at-risk species.

The program, which Fort Huachuca was designated for in 2015 by the U.S. Department of Defense, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture, is called the Fort Huachuca Landscape Sentinel Restoration Project. The latter is a colossal undertaking that in fiscal year 2018 garnered over \$9 million in federal, state and private funding to achieve its goals.

Several goals were reached by the end of fiscal year 2018 by Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape, according to the 2019 Sentinel Landscapes Accomplishments Report. The report lists not only the successes of Fort Huachuca, but those of the six other installations that form the partnership with the three federal agencies involved.

The goals for fiscal year 2020, outlined in a powerpoint presentation titled, "Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape Restoration Project FY 20 Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration Partnership Proposal," describes the goals for the next three years at a cost of about \$3.5 million total.

The objectives for fiscal year 2020 include: reducing and mitigating wildfire threats to communities and landowners; protecting water quality and supply for communities and industry; and improving habitat quality for at-risk species.

But this is not new to Fort Huachuca, said spokeswoman Angela Camara.

"What's important to understand is that Fort Huachuca has been engaged in protecting the land we defend since 1877 and environmental stewardship is not new to the way we do business," Camara said.

The Sentinel Landscapes initiative was launched in 2013 by the three aforementioned federal agencies. According to the 2019 Sentinel Landscapes Accomplishments Report, the "overarching goal of the partnership is to: preserve the natural amenities around defense facilities and thereby bolster agricultural productivity; protect biodiversity; increase access to recreation; and strengthen military readiness."

Each military installation involved in the Sentinel project has taken those overall goals and tailored them to fit their own unique areas and communities. Projects undertaken at each of the installations are funded by federal, state, local and private money.

“It’s kind of a unique program because it demonstrates that federal departments really can cooperate and work together,” said Larry Portouw, a retired U.S. Army colonel and the outgoing president of the Fort Huachuca 50, a non-profit that promotes the economic welfare of Sierra Vista by supporting the continuing development of Fort Huachuca. “This is an example that, ‘Yeah it can happen,’ for the benefit of all the departments, the people impacted and the government organizations.

“It’s a long, ongoing program with projects embedded in it.”

When the Sentinel Landscape initiative began in 2013, the first military installation designated was Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington. Two years later, Fort Huachuca and Naval Air Station Patuxent River in Maryland, were also chosen.

According to a press release by the three federal agencies in 2015, both locations “encompass vital military ranges needed to test and train with new and advanced aircraft and communications systems necessary to meet new threats as they arise.”

As for Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape, specifically, “Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape, the U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Department of Defense, are working with the Arizona Land and Water Trust, the Arizona Department of Forestry, and more than 40 other local, state, and federal partners to discourage incompatible land development, preserve native grassland and working ranches, and ensure the availability of scarce groundwater resources for the entire region,” the 2015 release states. “Priorities include grassland and wetland restoration efforts around the Babocomari and Upper San Pedro Rivers – key habitat for the Chiricahua leopard frog, yellow-billed cuckoo, southwestern flycatcher, ocelot, and jaguar; implementation of the State of Arizona’s Forest Action Plan; and conservation of nearly 5,000 acres of working ranchlands, all of which will buffer and protect Fort Huachuca’s mission as the leading unmanned aircraft system training center in the western United States.”

The three federal agencies also stated that Fort Huachuca is “home to the premier restricted military airspace for unmanned aircraft system training in the western U.S. and also supports training for personnel from the Air Force, Marine Corps, and U.S. Border Patrol. The remote, arid, and unique landscape surrounding the post near the Sonoran Desert is perfect for its electronic test mission, creating an electromagnetically quiet area for the Buffalo Soldier Electronic Test Range.

“Within this region a variety of local, state, and federal partners are working to reduce land and water development while preserving native grassland and ranches. Providing incentives and technical assistance to private landowners helps sustain a local way of life and ensures availability of scarce groundwater resources for the entire region.

“The Sentinel Landscape partners aim to prevent the drilling of up to 1,475 new wells to preserve water necessary for Fort Huachuca’s operation and the continued health and existence of species on and off post. In addition, protected lands buffer over 160,000 annual air operations and reduce proliferation of electromagnetic interference for 800 square miles of air space.”

With the help of their federal partners, Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape has achieved plenty since its designation in 2015.

Just a few of the program’s accomplishments include, according to the 2019 accomplishments report: In its goal to strengthen mission sustainability, Fort Huachuca and its partners “permanently protected 13,857 acres under the R2303 Military Airspace using funding from the Department of Defense’s REPI (Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration) Program. Under its goal to protect historic and economically ranches and farms that sustain Arizona’s food and fiber production and contain rare native grassland habitat, Fort Huachuca and its partners installed 29 watering facilities and 30 miles of wildlife-friendly fencing through the 2014 Farm Bill; they also permanently protected 8.7 acres of wetlands, 478 acres of upland, and one mile of stream habitat that will directly benefit the Chiricahua Leopard Frog, northern Mexican garter snake, Sonoran tiger salamander, Gila topminnow, and the Huachuca water umbel.”



In its goal to preserve forested lands and lands adjacent to or within Coronado National Forest, Fort Huachuca and its partners “completed pollinator planning and on 326 acres within the watershed surrounding Coronado National Forest and established 1.8 acres of wetlands,” the report states.

Portouw said the Department of Defense’s involvement in creating sentinel landscape included three objectives: solving encroachment issues, environmental issues and provide access to training space.

“Fort Huachuca’s objective is the training space,” Portouw said.

He said there is a proposal happening now within the Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape program that involves repairing “wildcat roads” in national forests and restoring existing roads.

“Then the Army can train without any impact on the national forests,” he said.

As explained by Portouw, the sentinel landscape initiative “allows the federal government to ... gain benefit by sharing funding. Each installation is different.

”At the end of the day, it allows the federal government to make better use of federal lands.”