

# Community , Navy work together with conservation easements

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The conservation easement program has been a win-win for ranchers, Churchill County and Naval Air Station Fallon. From left are Capt. Evan Morrison, commander, Naval Air Station Fallon; Pete Olsen chairman of the Churchill County Board of Commissioners; Carmen and Ernie Schank; Rusty Jardine, general manager and counsel of Truckee Carson Irrigation District; and Jim Barbee, county manager.

*Steve Ranson/LVN*

## Agricultural program allows air station to prevent encroachment

A sensible approach to protecting agricultural land as a buffer to Naval Air Station Fallon has been a win-win for local ranchers, Churchill County and the military.

Ernie Schank, retired director of the Board of Directors for the Truckee Carson Irrigation District, said the program to implement conservation easements began 16 years ago when former Churchill County Manager Brad Goetesch approached ranchers like Schank asking them if they would be interested in working with the Navy by selling their development rights while maintaining land ownership.

The Navy's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program ensures the land around NAS Fallon remains agricultural while at the same time, the base doesn't encounter encroachment that could hamper its mission.

Schank said other Navy bases such as San Diego faced serious encroachment by developers that would curtail training missions and expansion. Also, if a pilot crashed into an encroachment area, Schank said civilians could also be killed and property destroyed.

"I worked with other people such as Mario Peraldo (another local rancher), and we put together a proposed conservation easement program," Schank said. "This is what the county has today."

After several years, Schank and his late father Cyril signed the papers, and the family ranch became the first in Churchill County to enter into conservation easement with the Navy. Churchill County now has about 8,000 acres of private land entered into the program. Schank said the program's benefits have been numerous, but for him and other ranchers, agriculture has been protected while protecting the naval operations, and it keeps water in the valley.

"The Navy has been wonderful partners," Schank pointed out, "I have had a lot of personal friends that have been stationed here."

Schank said people flock to agricultural areas because of the green ground and trees. What was a pastoral scene at other military installations has turned into homes and shopping centers.

"In California, orange groves and fields are disappearing to construction," he said.

By entering into an agreement with the Navy, Schank said older farmers are allowed to keep their land in the family for future agricultural production. Four years ago, Schank and his son Abe purchased land on the northeast corner of Rio Vista Drive and U.S. Highway 50 and with the county approval, the county approved a conservation easement.

"This is one of these good use programs that forges our partnership with the local community and county," said Capt. Evan Morrison, commander of NAS Fallon.

During his naval career that has covered different assignments, Morrison said he's seen first-hand how commercial encroachment has hurt other military installations. Since he took command of the air station in 2019, he said the Navy hopes to continue the program, which includes input from different agencies such as TCID and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A buffer zone surrounds the base to allow for jets to take off safely.

Rob Rule, Community Planning and Liaison officer, said the Navy emphasizes the program is solely for encroachment protection.

"The landowners sign the deed in their property they won't build but maintain agriculture," he said.

NAS Fallon spokesman Zip Upham said this becomes a permanent part of the deed. He added the military pays landowners not to develop, but the county then receives those rights.

Rule, though, said other installations have embraced the REPI program, citing the success with the preservation of lands bordering military installations in the Pacific Northwest and Naval Air Station Patuxent River southeast of Washington, D.C. That air station in Maryland hosts the Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) and Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division (NAWCAD) headquarters in addition to 50 other tenant activities.

Both Rule and Upham said the Navy likes the program because by promoting more agriculture and less density, the military receives fewer noise complaints. The funds the Navy provides eventually goes to the county, which in turn, uses the money for development. Because the REPI program focuses on land east of Fallon, Rule said the county is using more land for planned development and growth to the north and west of the county seat.

Churchill County Commission Chairman Pete Olsen also emphasized the importance of the water staying in the Lahontan Valley and the importance of the conservation easement program.

"We encourage this program and work hand in hand with the Navy and appreciate how the Navy has stepped up to provide 90% of the funding," Olsen said.